

HOLOHAUS-2



CONTENTS

NEW ANIMALS [6](#)

character profile [6](#)

Synopsis [8](#)

Last Time [9](#)

SYMBIOSIS [11](#)

SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY [58](#)

character profile [58](#)

new posts [59](#)

Synopsis [62](#)

Last Time [63](#)

2.0 [64](#)

MERCENARY PLANET [88](#)

POI datafile [88](#)

Synopsis [92](#)

Last Time [93](#)

GRACE & EFFORT [95](#)

SCARRED ZERUEL [166](#)

character profile [166](#)

changelog [167](#)

Synopsis [172](#)

Last Time [173](#)

KIND PEOPLE SHOULD NEVER BE TREATED LIKE EMP-

TY ARMS (Σ) [174](#)

Verse 1 [174](#)

For Good or Worse [174](#)

Haptic Slang [177](#)



The Same Builders [183](#)

Almost a Virginity [186](#)

Anyone's Time [189](#)

Brighten [194](#)

Deep Screed [201](#)

Verse 2 [205](#)

Flutter Touch [205](#)

So Miscellaneous [210](#)

Genic [213](#)

Friction's Ground Slave [217](#)

Flex Band [220](#)

Tethering [224](#)

PSYCHOGRAMMA [228](#)

users [228](#)

updates [230](#)

Synopsis [232](#)

Last Time [233](#)

PROTOCOL 02.1: TRANSFER [1234](#)

IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT IN! [278](#)

character profile [278](#)

Synopsis [284](#)

Last Time [285](#)

FAILURE 02: CURSE [286](#)

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY [342](#)

character profile [342](#)

Synopsis [344](#)

Last Time [345](#)



RECORD II 348
NOTES 412



ENCIGISI
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20W
W0ECEN02
N10E88V
COMMOND
B1202
CB0010V
N11BICE2
22E
202LEWDI
1B20W
0012
W100V
W0EN0
D0G0VE
E1
T0B0VE
W1 01
1WC1D1D0
LEW0W
E102W0D
2ED D0
WE E11'
W01B12CI
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CON2EC1E
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211
D0G0V
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SPECIAL THANKS

to escher mcdonnell for dead cardboard

to nekosattva for the arcade gore

to rumour hell for the new limbs

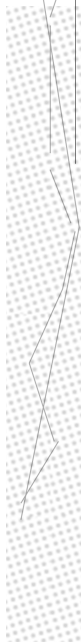
to Amara Reyes for the planetary

to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran_chan for sake and world

to epou for the name

and countless others including the one who sees this





NEW ANIMALS

by: Escher McDonell

NEW ANIMALS

Name: Essin XXXXXXXX
Birthday: January 28, 2XXX
Occupation: Barista
Sex: NB
Blood type: A-
Likes: Books, nail polish
Dislikes: N/A
Seen with: Lacie Ostler



[from Personnel Control dossier 3077782. FILE CONTROL RECLASSIFICATION PENDING. KH: Mars. INFORMATION REVISION REQUIRED.]

Essin XXXXXXXX would be a total nullity were it not for their mother, noted environmental extremist [REDACTED] KH NEPTUNE]. Father former cook, retired to Sudbury shortly after Essin graduated high school and started living on their own. Relationship characterized by mutual indifference.

Aimless, no interest in the future, few prospects. As they are estranged from Mrs. XXXXXXXX, and show no signs of shar-

character profile



ing their mother's violent ideological positions, we do not consider them a hazard. Random low-level audits to maintain information integrity will be sufficient.

world logs



NEW ANIMALS

Synopsis

after an ecological disaster destroys communication systems, the baffin war, as named in board meetings, commences with proxy wars between nations and corporate interests while new life emerges under the new sun, new mutations stalk the violent tundras.

the world continues on in a familiar way with school graduations and jobs, the new animals roam at the outskirts of the new cities with an unprecedented nature.

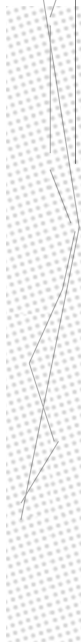
creatures altered by a grotesque nature, even the smallest of cruelties seem monstrous to the thousands of inhabitants.





Last Time

ecological disaster, knocked out communications grids and new mutations hunted by paramilitaries - ashbrecht and amelia chase the so-called “bears” for reasons more different than they might realize; essin graduates high school into a world pretending it will never change





CW: suicide, death, violence, firearms, workplace harassment, sexual harassment, sex, drugs, alcohol

from Darling, Charles. NEOZOOLOGIST'S WEEKLY DIGEST. 23.4 (2XXX) Abyssal Press. (Broadside.) HAZARD: VENUSIAN. This information is cleared for public distribution.

[Determined by Taxonomic Control Committee, 9 to 2 ruling.
See file 91BB802417.Q101 for full minutes.]

Species: New Rabbits

Habitat: Backyards

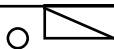
Danger Level: Holy shit

Hell of a clan, these ones. We've documented sixteen varieties of new rabbit, though I have a Darling or two who thinks there may be one variety and the new rabbits are eusocial, and a few absolute charlatans who claim they've chopped the new rabbits into twenty-one varieties. Who

NEW ANIMA

NEW ANIMALS

SYMBIOSIS



knows? I don't, and for present needs it matters less than a solitary turd in a sewage treatment plant.

While some interesting trivia surrounds varieties #7& #10 (the former puts its bladder to astonishing uses), we're going to focus on the one to lose sleep over: Variety #3. They'll kill you, and it will hurt the whole time you're dying. The other varieties won't slit your throat, but they will take a seat at the dinner table. Variety #3 relies on a microwave organ (dubbed the Darling's organ) for almost everything. They don't have eyes any more. We haven't been able to get our cameras since IC busted our photography lab but when we do we'll republish with pictures. In the meantime, they look a lot like old bunnies jammed into telephone wire insulators.

The new rabbit sees with the Darling's organ and some field work suggests that the organ supplements their ears. The Darling's organ is also its weapon. When the new rabbit activates its coil, it fries any non-new-rabbit nerve endings in a two-meter radius. It feels a lot like being showered in hot, shimmering oil until your meat heats up and pops all gold and crispy. (I know this first-hand, I tried it for science.) That's not what makes neolagomorphs devilish, though. When new rabbits hunt, they can combine





their microwave organs to cook prey alive.

Transitioning to a new species, the new rabbits have kept their rabbit quickness, and from your street corner they could still hear a pin drop on the moon, but you're boned if you think for half a second they're still timid. Coyotes have already figured out to avoid them. No, the new rabbits don't give a shit. You're their food. If you don't watch out, five or six will surround you and activate their coils before you hear their paws thumping on the grass. Your agonized nerves will shock your brain while microwaves writhe through your flesh and cook you inside to out.

Sometimes people get lucky and the pain causes a heart attack after a couple minutes. Sometimes.

Best avoid these mothers. If you're comfortable with a sidearm, kill them from a distance. If you don't spot them first, the fastest draw in the world won't save your life. Soon as the Darling's organ swells, you're property of pain. You won't stay upright.

Remember your visual sweeps, and don't skimp on checking the undergrowth. Even in the heart of the burbs, the bushes hedging gas stations could hold a warren of the bastards. If you spot one, keep an eye on it. And sweep, for



Christ! New rabbits are never alone. Keep your distance, throw the lunch meat you keep on your person at all times for just these occasions. While they're squabbling over it, escape.

Be sure to notify our good friends in Animal Control right away. The new rabbits have fried some children recently so AC is serious when it comes to dealing with warrens. The new rabbits usually manage to off a couple of the bastards.

Dog walkers were first to find each day's dead. Crinkled limp lumps in the sand under a cracked wooden playground structure, or half-swallowed in the weedy grass by the bike paths. Wrists split, or glutted on sedatives. Resting fingers on empty drain cleaner bottles, or dangling by improvised ropes from monkey bars. Hardware stores stopped stocking matches after the CEO of the hardware conglomerate lost two sons who'd collected match heads until they had enough to die by swallowing them.

The neighbourhood was riddled with absences like some eye was dragged across it, spreading disappearance wherever it looked. Essin guessed those vanishings (like everyone listening) would add their notches to the tally. Information Control disclosed that investigations were underway, but findings never reached the public. Some





citizen's committees met in living rooms around greasy grocery store cookies and undertook investigations. They vanished, too, but people like them returned several days later—hollow-eyed and mum about where they'd been.

Only the underground presses had anything to say about it, and dubbed the wave the Suicide Spring, but even they had their hands too full to report on it with any clarity. Quiet nights were pierced by gunshots, bangs made by doors kicked in. Fires leapt suburban rooftops to jab the blank-bellied sky. When they had the opportunity, the underground's pundits pointed to a similar phenomenon that happened ten years before, a suicide tsunami that carried off fifty-seven children. Its cause was never determined. Investigators had been unable to establish links between the suicides and though the age distribution was different among this recent batch it seemed the city was experiencing a revival. Speculation usurped observation—exegeses detailed social manias echoing over decades.

Essin knew these claims were incorrect. They'd been outside a lot that year, going to and from work, and saw no children wearing masks except kids playing Animal Controllers, so the two waves couldn't be tied.

And anyway other calamities rose that presented plausi-



ble alternate explanations though they'd emerged with scant comment outside illicit scientific editorials. Days were entangled in disastrous threads. It had been a year since graduation and time moved on quick, jittering lines. The suicides were swift forgotten, less relevant than other things. Essin stowed their brooding thoughts away and pressed on to their shifts.

And they thought, at first, that what they saw was crushed crab apples from a backyard tree on the path, pulverized by bikes and walkers.

Then remembered it was too soon in the season for crabapples.

It was twenty to five AM. He wasn't well-cooked though in some spots he'd been gnawed to the ribs. His jacket was melted and turned to warted bubbles and burnt here and there to nylon scabs. His open eyes looked like egg albumen twenty seconds after being dropped in boiling water.

A dog collar jangled.

"No need."

Essin looked up startled and for a sec worried they'd be



cooked and eaten too. They hadn't seen her. It was a frizzy-haired woman with a narrow gray dog. She was sitting in the grass by the margin. Her old greyhound sniffed at a haggard dandelion patch where a puddled mucus from the lady's gut cooled in the morning air. She looked like'd she'd just hobbled free from a burning car. Raised a phone in her hand like it was normal to own a phone. "Called it in already."

"Oh," Essin said.

A Schiaparelli D28 flechette projector rested crosswise on her lap. (Perhaps it was a Rattlemore? Essin hadn't paid attention in armaments class and didn't keep up on gun stuff as much as they thought they ought to. Weapons seemed to them like dangerous safety blankets, the people who clung to them did so for the same reasons nervous children cling to moldy plush polar bears.)

The dog whinnied, vaguely despondent he wasn't still walking.

"You see what happened?" Essin said.

"Just the aftermath, Rifle here scared off the new rabbits." Essin wasn't sure if she referred to the dog or the gun.



"Where's your gun? They're still around."

"Oh," Essin said, "In my bag." They hefted the green fabric Dollarama bag that held only a mass market paperback they'd fished from a book store dumpster and taped together, and a shitty homemade poke bowl in a tupperware container.

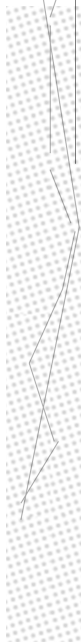
"You should probably keep it out. I don't think they were done eating. They scattered but god knows they're quick to reorganize. I'm just going to stay here and watch this guy so more of him doesn't get chewed up. They probably didn't go far."

Essin wasn't certain what to say just then so they just said, "Thanks."

"No problem," said the lady. "Hey are you going to get your gun out?"

"I promise," said Essin. "I'm just in a hurry." They smiled a bit blearily with what they could muster at a point in the day when the dawn's blue hadn't even thought to reach for daylight gold. And started walking. "Stay safe!"

"You know I will," said the lady.





They were dressed head to toe in black, shoes lacquered in a sugar scum, spilled milk, coffee grinds. It was humid. Morning had turned balmy now after lucid, patient April rain. That early their work clothes felt like kilns for nausea. A few cars roamed, and through the neighbourhood's arteries, the morning's first scouting buses and last stray night routes carried shift workers to and from the corporate boxes where they kept their hours, bumpers bouncing as their treads hit crumbling gray asphalt that had bubbled and split, smiting hopeful weeds. The gunners on the back-mounted bus-turrets lolled but didn't wake, scarfed in black exhaust.

Essin liked to dodge the main routes since earlier that season a gunner had spooked and nearly blown their leg off when they were cutting through some bushes. They'd found a shortcut through a park tucked away in the residential labyrinth. It was a reach where the houses weren't worth so much and often many people lived together under dubious legality. They'd dug pit barbecues in their front yards, and chairs (pillows sun-faded to pastel) lined porches overlooking weedy gardens decorated with dollar-store plastics, where dead leaves matted the nutritionless soil. Toys sat on lawns without fear of theft.



Trees here were older than in the newer suburban teratomas. One elm rotting from its insides had its boughs piled on a rusting trailer the city hadn't collected in years. Its wood showed pale wounds where storms had torn its arms from their joins. Essin pressed through a low pine brush that had the puke-y smell of cedar resin. Orange needles stuck to their dew-wet shoes.

A fog sheet floated over the park and from the east flank the rowed trees shattered the sun so its gold fell in slats on the fog. It looked like a piano made from clouds and without really thinking Essin stood with it there, looking, stock-still and picturing their hands running over those hazy keys, which tore and settled and seemed far too solid to be burnt away.

The new deer lifted its head.

In their life Essin had rarely seen animals in the suburb except squirrels and seagulls that infested parking lots like mangy cigarette butts. New animals hadn't even had much luck. Animal Control peppered the night with gunshots and mopped up before morning, painting asphalt in blood-splatter that would be hosed away by noon.

And yet here was the new deer.





Its antlers pale pink petals shifted, drinking sun. Translucent as a rat's ears and where light hit them, Essin caught the fractal circulatory web more like a leaf's than an animal's. Limp cilia dangled from albino fur among grey round warts like distended sunflower seeds that Essin guessed were blood-stuffed ticks. It fixed them with its cycloptic crimson eye a huge jelly, tiered lenses shimmering glassily and mica-reflective nodes in necklaces around its many pupils. Almost the full orb bulged from its socket, and instead of blinking the deer sucked it into their head and extended it again. Its frilled proboscis was still down and dissolving the grass in the fog. Light bled through points where its flesh thinned it had almost no muscle, ribs wrapped in tick-pebbled velvet.

Essin relaxed. Let bones slip to eased positions and muscles limp and watched the eye that watched them watching it back. Public Information had confirmed not two weeks earlier that what was rumored to be the case for so long was true: the new deer had perfect insight into the future. Animal Control had no luck catching them and less luck exterminating them, though with careful and meticulous strategic planning they could be herded (you had to plan so that the nature of the plan wasn't visible even once it was executed someone had detailed this on the news



when laying out Animal Control's schemes for new deer management).

They eased over. Shoes shush-shushing in the wet grass and all stress within themselves dismantled. Sunlight brushed the fog away.

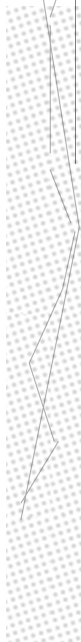
They reached. Spread fingers gently on its fur. It was greasy. Wiry. And the ticks in their multitude—their eyes cracked open: they were all the same color as the deer's, and this close up Essin spotted tadpole nubs that would be legs and flaps that would be membranous antlers.

They were new fauns.

Cilia among the new deer's fur tasted Essin's palm, and they stood like that, slack, breathing, while the deer ate, and watched them.

Until it stamped its hooves, and Essin pulled their hand away. The new deer sprang, leapt three times through the fog and into the brush and yards and houses beyond. Perhaps on its way past the neighbourhood to the woods and farmlands outside the city.

Essin was giddy as hell. They tried to stamp it out as they





jogged to the mall.

“Sleep in?” Their manager, Honey, stood with her back to the Starbucks door smoking, a revolver drooped in her hand and a shotgun strapped to her back.

“No,” said Essin. “New animal run-in.”

“On the bus?”

“I walked.”

Honey was described by every employee as a ‘sexy librarian’ though she didn’t have much interest in books and was, like about four-fifths of people who managed a Starbucks, a part-time fitness instructor. She looked as though she could pop a skull like a caper between her absurdly muscled thighs. She passed Essin the shotgun. It was a simple two-barreled bit of cheap junk that most Starbucks issued to their opening staff.

“You should take the bus,” said Honey, jangling with the keys. “Don’t forget to keep an eye on the ditch. Two kinds of gophers were replaced yesterday afternoon.”

“I will. It’s so expensive, though.”



"What's it at? Six dollars per trip?"

"I make twelve an hour."

"True, I guess," Honey was struggling with the lock.

"Fucking hell. They need to fix this thing."

"I'm saving up to move to a new place."

"Just move in with other people. It's cheaper."

"Yeah, I guess."

The key clicked in the lock. "Okay, ready?"

Essin cracked a yawn that fell to a, "Yep."

"Go," said Honey. The door squealed on its hinge and the chime sounded. She was up with her pistol, moving to the alarm. Unset it. Essin made for the bathrooms with the shotgun—nothing had emerged from the toilets though last night's closers had left unswept toilet paper pieces all over the floor. They yanked open the supply closets and nothing but paper towels and cup sleeves toppled out, so they shoved them back in place with their shoulder. The atrium was empty. Nickels silvered the quiet fountain bed.



Checking the cash terminal showed no parasites.

Honey hollered from the back room. "Check the fridges?"

Essin pried open a fridge door by wedging a toe against the gasket. A milk bag had leaked so the other milks sat in a thin white puddle. Essin checked all eight fridges and checked the cupboards where nothing was stored but tetra packs filled with synthetic lemonade. It had only one pack that had fallen on its face.

"We're clear!" Essin shouted. "A milk exploded. We're running low on lemonade."

"How low?"

"We have one."

"Shit. We'll deal with it later. Check the drive-thru garbage will you?"

"On it."

"Then get started on the pastry case."

"Will do."

Honey, on her knees, pawed through silver bags stuffed



with coffee beans, stooped to check under the steel wire shelves. The drive-thru garbage had been ransacked and there were cups and paper bags and fast-food trash everywhere. The brush behind the bucks had been scorched along the top, black buds popped and new leaves crinkled. Something left a cherry-red blood trail slinking up the drive-thru and at last around the fence, and Essin followed it and checked behind the fence to ensure nothing was there. There was something, but it looked like a barrel of cranberries shot out of a cannon into a concrete dam. Brass casings gleamed from the gray-gold grass.

“What took you?”

“Found blood.”

“I didn’t hear any gunshots?”

“Dead already.”

Essin stabbed open pastry boxes with scissors. They were still cold from the fridge and Essin marked them with water-soluble tags and jotted dates with peel-back pencils while Honey fiddled with the Mastrena’s pieces and waited for the safe to open. Essin laid out biscuits, and sweet biscuits. They tallied the scones, all four varieties, pumpkin





pepper and blueberry coulee and cheddar herb and apple cinnamon melody, and felt vaguely despondent that the pumpkin ones were fewer than the others (which meant they likely wouldn't have the opportunity to steal one before their break, which meant they'd run out before they could steal one).

With slithering horror they laid out the vanilla and chocolate sconelets like malformed larva and set the assorted cake-pops upright with paper stems in their plastic block display brick. The apple fritters (a lot like chowing down on deep-fried thumbtacks) were arrayed, and Essin halved the sacrificial breakfast sandwiches, one of each, and when the oven was done heating they roasted the halves and with skill evaded the molten cheese compounds that burned even through plastic gloves and these they swaddled in sandwich papers and skewered with labels. They added the butter bars with oats in them the yoga ghouls paired with their skinny beverage subspecies, and with iron will overcame the determined nausea now nudging their throat-bottom as they one by one shucked the dinner-plate-vast cookies from their clear plastic jackets and aligned them in rows sparking ginger molasses sugar and dark chili chocolate chunk and outrageous mocha cinnamon chocolate and wretched oatmeal raisin.



And before they were anywhere near done, Honey unlocked the front door and passed Essin a drive-thru headset and had them punch their card on the drive-thru cash.

“Want a coffee?” said Honey.

“I’ll take a tea.”

“What kind?”

“Cosmic Sovereignty.”

“We’re out,” said Honey. “We’re also out of Astral Mist, Interstellar Bergamot, and English Breakfast.”

“Chai?”

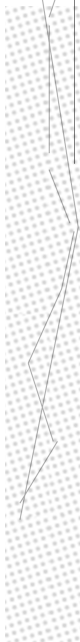
“Uh. That too.”

“Coffee, then.”

“God these delivery issues are murdering us.”

“Yep.”

Bings sounded in Essin’s ear and milk screamed and the gossipy morning crew arrived and over the headsets continued their single year-spanning conversation about





people Essin had never met. Essin shifted huge tureens and dumped liter after liter of just-barely not fresh coffee down the sink. People in clean foreign cars fussed over the foam percentage of their lattes, which for some had to be zero percent, which was a feat when it came to drinks made with aerated milk. Time had begun the day transparent — its events preserved with the perfection of seeds in ice — but broke down into an oversweet, lactic sludge. It mixed with suburban syrup and was shattered by the morning's whirling blades.

Children played in the fountain. Cheerios bobbed on its surface and parents arrived with strollers and sketchy Francophones monopolized the ethernet plugs on the giber terminal and the day crashed through itself — then began to crawl forward, sluglike, grinding, with continental patience and tectonic increments measured in fingernails. Essin had hoped to fast through their first break but their guts roiled with wet hungry bubbles so they bought the overpriced store oatmeal and snuck three packets when Honey said they could make it themselves.

Sunlight edged through the drive thru window. Carved its light on the steel fridge fronts. In the short lulls Essin leaned out the window so their cheeks touched day. Traffic



roared up the road to the mallplex.

Ears vibrating from the headset bings and feet sore and skin scummy from aerosolized milk when their shift was done Essin had earned a few new cuts on their knuckles from the razor-edged ice box door and for probably about the sixth time they had the epiphany that restaurant poke bowls were only filling because they doused that shit in quasi-Asian mayonnaise. Leaving the bucks to see the world in full daylight felt like looking at a sere noon flat with salt rubbed in your eyes.

Basement empty and quiet when they got home. Nothing but desolate air-vents rattling as they carried cool air to the landlord's living room. It was freezing down there and smelled a bit like fried pork. Essin kicked off their work shoes and shunted them into their narrow closet corner. A long time past, the landlord had lanced at finishing the basement, sheathing its meaty insulation in drywall and laying out carpets across the bluish concrete. His determination strayed after he bought supplies, but before much was done. His thrust at finishing the basement left only a bathroom, with a shower stall and a toilet jammed between it and a tiny sink, blinds over the small window that looked out at the street. The mirror was still speckled





with white paint. The rest was gray concrete dotted with rings from where paint cans had been stored, broken bicycles and inert barbecues—corner usurped by a disheveled drum kit and a long work bench piled with hardware and a board where pliers and wrenches and hammers were mounted on red-rubber-dipped hooks. It wasn't legal for him to store stuff down there but it was the only place a reasonable distance from work where Essin could afford to live alone. The washer and dryer sat in an oval of diffused light from the basement window that faced the backyard. Essin had tried to wall off a nook with clothes hung from hangars on the ceiling pipes, which hid their desk, mattress, and little bookshelf.

They stripped. They pressed through their dangling shirts and fell blearily on themselves in the shower and thought about being destroyed by someone who was not Honey to pretend they weren't sexualizing their boss (but honestly). Their nads were soaped up and the cheap suds mingled with steam and though the soap was meant to smell like strawberries and watermelon it only really smelled like whatever they put in lollipops to flavour the overwhelming sugar. From sheepishness they always did this in the shower and so masturbation smelled like bottom-shelf shampoo.

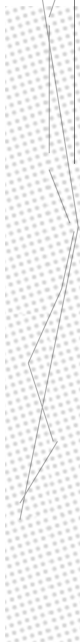


For a while after they came, they rested crumpled on the shower floor, yellow stars in their eyes and gums numb from dehydration and steam and heat. Their hair felt over-wet. It hadn't been good but it had been loud. They felt over-clean and knew their skin would be over dry as they toweled off.

A thumping came from upstairs. The landlord was home and he was fucking somebody. Picture frames rattled against the wall and you could just hear her voice sounding distant and tinny through the silver vents on the basement ceiling. Essin crawled into the dampish crumpled sheets on their mattress and wedged their head between two pillows against the noise.

It wasn't necessary. They slept.

Partway through the afternoon Essin rose from dreams about interminable rusting museum districts and shaking trees over prairies where people gathered to sell elephant bones. The basement smelled like steam from a big and ritzy Chinese place downtown it bubbled, rice air and pork and aromatics. A laugh Essin could only describe as womanly answered a baritone chuckle. They slipped back

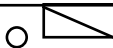




into sleep. When they woke fully the floor upstairs was silent.

They boiled instant noodles on their hotplate in the kitchenette jammed in a corner. It was close enough to dinner time and they intensely regretted lunching on a shitty poke bowl. Finished and readied themselves for the party that night. They picked out something vaguely frilly and painted their nails with black polish and oily mirrored glitter and packed their knapsack with water and money and a few snacks and schnapps. And then read until dusk.

For weeks, when they weren't working, they slept. A party was an aberration and even if they knew nobody there it was fine to go alone. They walked the neighbourhood. Slurpee cups and chip bags skittered grittily across asphalt, wind-pushed down coiling streets. At work they volunteered to take out the garbage, so while they slung trash sacks into dumpsters they could briefly watch the morning clouds grow and pile together into roving mountains whose peaks and tails interrupted the light. Sometimes the clouds drifted out to the hills, other days they turned to fierce bouts of short and furious rain whose residues on the parking lot cars were blinding mercury points in the afternoon sun. Between the rain, arid windstorms yanked



porch umbrellas from strip mall bars. Even if its mutations were obvious, there was still something comforting in the outside when they worked like that and slept so much.

When she came in the first time, Essin recognized Lacie but though they frantically fished for it, they had no name for her and no idea where they'd met her before.

She'd been a barista ("coffee gibbon" she joked) for the company some years past, so she was less of a condescending prick. She lacked the hideous air of the bored and privileged, though it oozed from every wall and every object in the store. She spoke with a gentle sarcasm that bloomed from her spine and her belly. Something reflected from the marrow. She worked at the Chapters downtown, and came in to grab her coffee before catching the cross-city express. Essin started hanging out with her on their break. They sat together on the patio and people-watched the customers. One day she caught Essin taking out the cardboard garbage and followed them to the dumpsters.

"I love smashing boxes. Once when I was a kid, I emptied all the boxes in the basement just to smash them," she said. Then, "May I?"

Essin popped the condensed ones to their original shapes





and Lacie leapt up and stomped on them and kicked them and screeched. Her voice sounded on the blank walls behind the strip mall. An old mop handle juttred from a dumpster and she pulled it out and thrust it into the boxes, punching some in and punching through others and grinning wild as blood flushed to her arms and her cheeks and then in a fury pounding on the side of the fat rusty green dumpster until the wood dowel snapped and spun away to clatter on the winter-warted asphalt.

“You... God... damned... bastards!”

She dropped the splintered wood. Her shoulders heaved as she breathed. Sweat jeweled her neck, slipped down her collar. She turned to Essin, flush filling her cheeks, a jackal laugh drily lurking in her throat, watching from the epiglottis.

Essin'd been out for too long. They started heaving garbage bags pregnant with coffee grinds into the wet dumpster, upsetting the fly colony. Something wriggled in their chest and they wrestled to hide their rising blush.

She watched. Sweat grains pasted her bangs to her forehead. Some ferocious happiness rode her face.



However strongly Essin felt it then, arms oozing between them, tasting each other as they stood alone in that place, it seemed as though the potential links, baseless and unstable, would pass, and Essin would return to their barren comfort.

They gulped. Stopped hucking garbage and watched back.

And as if to sweep away the thing that prickled each and every hair on their neck and back and forearms, Essin furrowed their brow like they didn't understand, because it's difficult to admit you understand something between, even and especially when it is something you both understand.

"You okay?" they said.

She frowned. She wiped her forehead.

"Yes," her half-grin flattened. "It's nothing."

And then thought, It's safe to go back now.

"You can have my partner beverage," Essin said. "I just want water."

"I should go," Lacie said, and left for the bus-stop without



grabbing coffee.

Essin walked along the gravel margin. The old corn fields still lay fallow with weeds clambering up last years' brittle brown growth. Past where the city made paths and the only place to walk was beside the road, hair ruffled by trucks and bellying winds white feathers flying from caged sides as they bore chickens to abattoirs. Here the houses turned their backs to the horizon, and hid their back windows behind slender trees. The Walmart hunched and the cinema's extravagant silhouette splayed bright against the dusk. Night watch planes, roving, tossed blurred shadows on the stores' grime-streaked plaster walls.

This far out, Essin could spot the Animal Control fortplexes clearly. Concrete slabs whose few windows were curtained and never lit, even at night. They couldn't have told anyone then just when the neighbourhood's first fortplex popped up, but it was well after they'd started recording memories. Even so, each had the look about it of something old as any building in the city. Close-up their concrete was spotted with radiating lichen dots and moss-bearded as a brick-sized tombstone on a pauper's grave, letters eroded to nothing.



The lowering sun struck the fortplexes and cast their windows in gold.

After a while Essin reached a place where the ground had been scalped by backhoes. Boulders had been piled in the center of the flat and its puddles were sterile, with velvet-silt bottoms. Trees showed their soles: uprooted bottoms like jagged suns flaring from carrion feet. The night lagged. By degrees evening lurched its pieces into place. The sun faded on the dirt parapets and trenches that marked future streets and basements. A few preliminary houses had been constructed — pale wood and white tarps beating the air, doors stapled with cheap paper signs to warn kids they were on camera when obviously no cameras monitored the dead construction site. Essin's feet half-sank in the soil. Light rose from the satellite neighbourhood. Found the cowpath to the lingering scraggled woods that opened onto the old landfill.

It had begun already and smoke hit them: a bonfire spiking already higher than the gently shaking canopies. Speakers pelted their sternum and skin tingled in anticipation at curling marijuana plumes. Lasers crisscrossed the tree trunks. The grass was trampled and already littered with water bottles and gum wrappers and cigarette foils. The





crowd wasn't huge but the space felt busy, people heading to the group and out to the bushes to smoke. It was too bright even this far from the suburb for starlight and so an indigo blankness accepted the fire.

A few drunk teens shot off their guns in the air when the bass dropped. Schnapps fired Essin's tongue. They pushed to the crowd.

Her face was shattered by jagged strobes. Lacie. An animated person seen through a zoetrope. Essin's head was numb and wooly from liquor and heat. Sweat pressed against them and so did she. She smelled like cheap shampoo; berries, sugary synthetics. Essin shuddered when their noses brushed. It was loud. It smelled like fire and organ meat frying in a wok. Some dude nearby whooped as her tongue intruded on Essin's. She reached, and kissed like a bite. Her nails were in their hair and one hand scooped past their belt down to an asscheek and her tongue tasted like ashtray, which was something Essin liked. More guys had gathered, rich guys—white phone lights glared as they filmed the couple. Essin's neck bent back, and they felt the cricks and cracks faint along their spine. This person's hair and cold saliva on their upper lip. Jaws started to get sore. Teeth bumped and a blood-taste flooded from



their lip where it gently broke. A hand had drifted from back to front.

"Yo this is dope!" some dipshit shouted. Essin opened their eyes and a spectator had his dick out and was masturbating and dead-eyed, hand working a shrumpy cock.

Essin recognized him too. He came into the store so often that they remembered he ordered a tall pike like that, "tall pike." He wore a giant shirt the same giant shirt, most days, though sometimes he just showed up in an undershirt and some days he wore a rain jacket. It was bright, five different colour patches, red, green, blue, yellow, and white. He looked somehow clownish since it hung so loose from his scarecrow body. He had wide, watery eyes that crouched on addled perches in his sallow, balding skull.

He showed up at their store every morning. He pretended to read the paper while leering at the women baristas and the yoga ladies in yoga pants. Essin had never noticed until that moment but yes, he did leave the store moments after Lacie picked up her coffee. This struck clear, through the alcohol. He did sit out on the patio whenever they were hanging out with Lacie. And sometimes, when they'd seen her, from a distance, at the bus stop, he was standing just a few steps away.





Lacie grabbed their face. They didn't know if she'd seen. It was a thing like a smile. Coloured lights green yellow and magenta flicked against a wall in the dark sinks that were her eyes. Dragging their attention back. She brushed a stray bang from their brow. Essin pushed into her hand as she nipped their neck. Electric ripples flew where tooth touched tendon. Essin spluttered, hips quivering.

"Holy shit!" the same dipshit bellowed, loud enough to sound over the bass, the electric racket nothing but dim, fluctuating volume. "Are you fucking seeing this?" to no one in particular, "This is insane!"

Some dude wearing nothing but hot pants and a suede vest had gotten on his knees and was sucking the masturbator's dick and he didn't seem to mind the tanned twink at him now, gripping the guy's gelled blonde hair.

"This is crazy!"

Essin broke. Like wood frame shattered on rocks they shivered and at last heard their own quiet moans break to something audible. Someone passed Lacie a joint and they exhaled smoke down Essin's throat. They fell to their knees. Head against this half-stranger's stomach. She kneeled to kiss some more.



“Holy shit!”

“Yo dude you’re fucking a faggot!”

“He’s good at this shit,” said the guy getting sucked off.

“Fuck yeah. Aren’t you, faggot?”

Lacie, wet-fingered, led Essin to the clearing’s edge. The pair pressed through the crowd and away from the light and fell together in the wet leaves where tree trunk knuckles knotted against their backs.

Fire stink clotted the air, and sweat. It wasn’t quite so loud. Lacie rode their face, one hand against tree bark and the other gripping their hair while Essin’s tongue worked her clit. They drank schnapps and water. Dozed together spooning in the underbrush. At some point in the night Essin felt Lacie’s lips and hot breath by their ear. “Sorry about that. I didn’t realize we had an audience.”

“That’s fine,” said Essin. “That was fun.”

“Sorry?”

Essin turned and rasped into her ear. “That was fun. I had fun.”





“Good.” She nuzzled closer. “I think I’ll keep you.” She raked fingers down their back. But though this gesture was one that from any lover obliterated everything that wasn’t a need to unify their body with someone else’s, Essin only partly noticed.

Their eyes had wandered again to the sky, a place where the webbed tree branches broke.

Perhaps they said something like, “What the fuck?”

If the phenomenon had been predicted by Public Information astronomers, it hadn’t been posted to the gibber or announced on the news.

It was green. It had tails by the dozen and they were all writhing like scum-wrapped weeds in a current, blasting back from the comet’s head. Its core was a radioactive eye as it marched above, and against light from Walmart parking lots and night parties and houses and roads its glow grazed the midsummer refuse, the mud fields and territory flayed, drawn, and quartered by developers for their insolent growth. The comet’s ribbons stretched back farther than Essin could see and it seemed low enough that if they’d waved, an interplanetary passenger could have spotted them and waved back.



As long as Essin would live their memory would distort this moment. Some mental editor, wizened and pale from a lifetime in a dark room bathed in fumes adjusting things according to their own sense of how a story flows without consulting anyone clipped this moment from its spot and set it at the beginning. As if Essin had seen it before the first new animals arrived, and it was somehow an omen, trumpeting their coming.

Lacie didn't mention it, later, never brought it up even when they were on the train to ocean, the Colonel howling that they were off to see the comet where it had fallen in the sea.

That astral slash drifted south. Like it was steered by high altitude winds and not the momentum gravity carved through the seething void. Together the fresh couple watched it. Lacie reached up and spread her fingers and closed them again and again as if to catch it.

At some point they were walking home, sky blank except in places where urban brushfire stippled its gut. Clouds rolled in. Tomorrow it would rain.



"I'm sorry about that time," said Essin.

"What time?"

"With the boxes. I'm sorry about that time with the boxes."

"What for?"

"There was a thing happening in that moment and I tried to keep that thing from happening."

She clutched her backpack. Essin had wanted to hear her jackal laugh, but she offered a confused and gentle snort. It felt like something opened between them like the guts of a sacrificed sheep.

"Did you ever dissect foetal pigs in high school?"

"I didn't finish high school," she said.

"Why not?"

"Oh," she said, "Reasons. Why do you ask? I mean about the pig."

"Oh," said Essin, "I dunno. There were people in my class who were naturals at it. They held their scalpels like pens. There was a girl in my group who cut the heart open, per-



fectly, so you could see all its chambers.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Yeah,” Essin felt as though they waddled through their thoughts, anxieties stuck like burrs, “I think... I just thought of it because... it seemed like something you’d be good at?”

She laughed. The laugh was real, this time. Dry. Sharp. Yeah, it said, yeah, I would.

“Why did you quit?” Essin said.

She pulled back. Like she’d been hit. Terror bit her, just for a moment, a wince as though Essin’d unexpectedly called her a cunt or something and she’d expected so much more from them.

“Quit what?”

“Starbucks. I mean, you don’t get the benefits we got there at your new job, right?”

“Oh,” she said, cackling, “Oh. Oh that.

“One of the closing staff had called in sick in a store in a





different district. He'd been shitting blood for days and finally decided to tell someone about it. They needed someone to cover it.

"I bussed out. It was the Pinecrest store which is super busy. The staff was all peppy. All the guys on cash were gay and laughed and talked to each customer like you'd talk to an elementary school teacher you hadn't seen since you were six. A lot of people came through: French-speaking bureaucrats working late at the government offices and girls in Walmart sweaters and ball caps heading out to the movies and middle aged chai ladies with very, very specific orders.

"The manager put me on bar, but, like, it was easy enough to zone out. And I started thinking: here I was, a borrowed person, replaceable by anyone. It was like a secret none of the customers knew. I realized that I had nothing to do with it: the company, the store, the people, their lives. I spent time there, but it was just a second sleep. Anything I did was an act in a dream and would be lost when I woke up.

"And somehow this made me remembered exactly how it felt to kiss someone. I mean, it almost seemed like I felt the physical sensations. And not just someone who kind of



turned you on but like someone who wrecks you with how much they turn you on."

She squeezed Essin's hand.

"I understood what this was: it was the store, the newness of the store. That was what it felt like: the first time tasting someone's saliva.

"At close the supervisor sent me outside to collect the patio umbrellas. That store is right next to the Queensway, and the night clouds were pink from city lights. And I thought that each car was as unattached to any give position. That was what made life possible. Being attached to nothing.

"So I quit."

They were well into the neighbourhood by then and Lacie still walked beside them. They were laughing about yakuza tattoos, cutting across the high-school football field. Wind hit them then and Lacie tugged Essin to the ratty wooded remnant that divided the school from residences. The trees rushed, outlines swaying against an indigo suburban



dark.

They curled up together in a clearing made in an elm-tree's ruins — something had happened to it. It had been dismantled by the city. Its heart had been burnt out so chalky black scales lined its hollow. They nuzzled each other, clothes making sandpapery noises as they pressed their torsos together.

“What do you know about the new animals?” she said, schnapps on her breath, voice originating from a point at the centre of Essin's brain.

They squeezed her. They worried briefly about what was on the ground: a litter of beer caps and old condoms and crushed cans and foot-rubbed roots. Saying nothing by way of response (it seemed to take too much effort) Essin fell asleep breathing into her cheek

And woke to crashing in the brush. In the faint light from backyard lamps that bordered on the woods, they saw paired wild eyes. Five bright-coloured patches. The guy was there. The man in the pied shirt. The dude from the patio, from the party. Essin hadn't seen him since they'd last glanced at him getting sucked off but somehow he'd arrived.



His hand was around his dick. He squatted like a troll, frantically masturbating in the undergrowth, confusion twisting his face.

It'd been hot in the crowd but now Essin felt like a small bird trying to loose itself from a tar pit.

Lacie stood. She was drunk and on wobbling legs. Essin was sure, certain that she was going to leave them there, go with him, suck his dick, collapse in his bed with him. It was a certainty as sure as the sun would rise tomorrow. They would never see her again.

She screamed. She fucking howled. It wasn't terror but hate, hate that seemed half-genetic, a pure evolutionary bloodthirst against all its host's enemies. She looked fifteen times bigger than Essin knew she was. Her biceps bulged, it seemed as though her hair rose on its ends like a cats'.

What's the opposite of a mask? Something you wear under your face, or that wears your face, itself representing nothing. A skull?

And her voice when she spoke was hissed and cool and thin like a scentless, gaseous poison seeped from some



unseen underground fissure.

"You fucking shit," she spat, "You know what it's like to be stalked by a fucking piece of shit like you?" She stepped towards him, cackling, "I hope you die, and that it takes a long time, a long, long time, and that something in your brain fucks up so when it hurts it will feel like it hurts for fucking ever!" He edged back. His fist stopped churning and Essin might have been hallucinating but it seemed his wang went limp in seconds.

He struggled to do up his pants.

Her voice echoed: "You dumb motherfucker. You fuck right off and die."

His pants slipped down. Essin heard the man trip and fall in the sticks and litter.

Then she was on him. She kicked. She howled. He made no sound. He tried to stand but she kept kicking him over. Drunk as she was, her blows were quick and sharp and would not be deflected. When he at least stumbled up, his pants still cuffed an ankle and he shuffle-ran as his pale, hairy ass vanished in the dark.



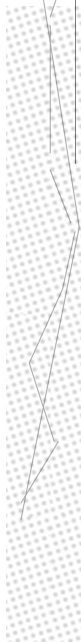
"I hope some fucking monster is waiting for you out there," she called after him.

Not vicious now, but the voice of someone calling farewell when parting with a group of friends.

Gentle leaves prickled above. Lacie stilled. She turned to Essin, teeth flashing in the dark. She marched back to the clearing and fell on them. Tongues on each other, spit and beer and Lacie felt like a new species, a person unparalleled as an upland moa or tuatara.

She pulled her mouth away, set a hand on Essin's forehead, grabbed their hair, yanked it and twisted their skull into the dirt. She pushed her fingers between their lips and teeth. They tasted salt and soil beneath her nails. Her breath rushed happily as she hooked her fingertips around to Essin's throat.

At some point they were still lacing fingers together with Lacie's and guiding her down the stairs to their apartment, hiding shoes in a closet corner. They were nude and soap was slick between them in the shower. They were together and sleeping, guts sick and scoured with fatigue on dampish sheets.





"It's cold," she said, cocooning herself in the duvet and pressing close to the person she'd snagged at that night's happenings.

Near dawn klaxons sounded over the parking lots. Guns rattled the night and airplanes roared over suburbia, shrilling as their bombs fell on some new animal incursion from the fields. But sleep had imploded over them and the outer war couldn't reach their bottomless and empty dreams.

And a monster was waiting for the stalker.

The coyote had changed into the new coyote that very night.

Addendum:

Gray literature file 8888.112/2XXX, "Formal complaint against Colonel Hudson Ashbrecht"

Complainant: Dr. Emmanuel Pendleton

Complaint:

* JCO Code of Conduct Violations



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- * Ornery behaviour in official proceedings
 - * Confessed use of narcotics in the course of executing duties
 - * Physical assault on a colleague
- Comments: Col. Ashbrecht threw an ashtray at Dr. Pendleton after after it came to light that doctor believed Ashbrecht's views were "unscientific." The ash tray was glass and Dr. Pendleton has suffered a concussion.

Transcript (excerpt):

Look, guys, I've thought long and hard on this one, and I'm not in a mood to mince words the idea that this phenomenon reflects some kind of global sentience acting up against us is insane. Nature isn't a thing. We made it up around the same time we plucked the forbidden fruit and it taught us how to make concrete and calculators. (I'm not being literal. A fruit didn't do that. We did that.) And I don't mean just conceptually either we made the natural world what it is physically through killing things and farming things and doing the stuff we as people do by being alive. Just like all life. There isn't a man vs. nature that 'Gaia hypothesis' a bunch of musty assholes





have been floating as a way to conceptualize a physical world system going into absolute revolt is so ludicrous I can't believe we're discussing it in a serious conversation with a JCO advisory board.

You'd just have to prove too many things to show that the ecosphere is somehow sentient in a way that's separate from us to account for this phenomenon. I'm not being a stupid turn-of-the-millennium Dawkinsian cunt about this. Frankly what offends me isn't the mother earth idiot buggery of the idea though that is, I'll say, extremely stupid. No, it's the lack of sophistication. Like the only way we can think about this fucking world is 'what if it was just like our brain but bigger?' As if somehow our noggins are the blueprint for the universe. Fucking stupid.

[Dialogue omitted.]

Yes. The phenomenon centers around population centers. Spreads from them like cracks a bullet might make in a mirror. That doesn't make us the target it makes us the center. Assuming that the center is the only factor in a phenomenon is so just fucking stupid I can't even explain it to your stupid asses. It's like saying a hurricane's eye is what drives the storm. Just pick up a fucking book once in a while, one that wasn't written by some fuckwit with a



management degree. Other species have caused massive ecological changes before. Tremendous ones. We wouldn't be breathing the fucking atmosphere if they hadn't done it before. No, no — we aren't the victim of a planet getting revenge or cosmological antibodies attacking us or some extraterrestrial intelligence — we're embedded in the process. A component of it. Inseparable from it.

[Dialogue omitted.]

Why are they targeting us? Please listen to what I'm saying. They aren't.

[Dialogue omitted.]

What about the new polar bears?

[Dialogue omitted.]

Look — to get a provisional understanding — to get close to a provisional understanding — of what's going on here, we need to get back to first principles of the study of nature. No not natural selection asshole. We had ten thousand years before that crock's interregnum of ideological torpor. No, team, we're talking about first principles. We're talking about ritual.



[Dialogue omitted.]

Intoxicated? I'm high as fuck. I don't understand how or why you insist that I need to be sober for these idiotic luncheons when if you used your fucking eyes I wouldn't need to explain a thing to you.

[Comment inaudible.]

What was that Pendleton? Grow a notochord and say that over your breath. I need to know what I'm working with.

DETERMINATION: No disciplinary action needed.

Notes: We kindly ask all members of staff to not waste our time with reports of Colonel Ashbrecht's behaviour. Please be patient. His work is important and his behaviour is the product of a difficult upbringing. Thank you for your understanding.



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SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY

character profile

Name: Christine Leung

Birthday: July 19th, 2000

Sex: Female

Occupation: half-juice influencer, half-beauty queen, fully-fallen woman

Likes: american apparel, dov charney, sleazecore, rapey flash photography portraits, terry richardson, knee high socks, cat marnell, Macbook Pro (13-inch, Mid 2012), cory kennedy, beach house, BLOGS, indie-electronica, MGMT, bebe zeva, iPod, the olsen twins, yellow american spirits, hbo girls?? lol uhhhhh uh hh im missing some u get it i could go on

Dislikes:: weak boys, gay fucking shit, online whores, gross quirky bitches that dont wash, blue pilld podcast hoes, people with real teeth, bellybutton rings, fathers, little shallow bitches that suck the words out of some diseased old cock and repeat them you're so damn boring bitch.

Blood type: A+ magna cum louda

Seen with: i want to wear something so hot its peeling off of me and the flash is sucking on my face and licking my socks. i'm all by myself i'm SO damn sad. :(:(... imagine my little belly heaving with juice, lipstick a little smudged on my lips.



by: [nekosattva](#)

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"Christine Leung's will and testament," scribbled and then crossed out with a blue-pink gel pen. Every "i" is dotted with a heart.

"Hi mom, dad. You're probably gonna read this, looking for answers or something. You're gonna pretend you never saw it coming. You're gonna have closed eyes, pretending your tears are some kind of glue and that blindness was something other than every single terrible choice you've made. You might think I did this out of hatred, that I had a heart so heavy with revenge I'd gladly crater onto the concrete and splash myself on all the downtown windows just to drive a dagger thru your ugly black hearts. You are mistaken. You are so so so mistaken. Believe it, even though you are vain-- none of the choices I've made had anything to do with either of you."

"You will grab Yelena, you will box her ears like you did to me; you will beat the blood out of her little face and tell yourself they're answers. Believe me she is not to blame for anything, she's only taught me how to sharpen my little dagger with which I chisel

new posts



& carve a piece out of rotting earthly wood. I'd like to share something with you, something I hope you could read if it turns out I'm having a funeral soon."

"Like others, I've always felt deeply that I was somewhat different. Unlike others, I've always been treated different. Where others failed, I've always succeeded; I've never not gotten what I wanted, either through stealth or sheer force. Where others are flabby, sloppy I am poised, my hair up like an angry little wasp. I've never felt weak; even when my bones break, as I feel deep hot red blood coarse course through my veins. I remember the very very very first time I realized that the rest of the world was merely fragile glass aching for a fist: a bully, her fat pale face stinging crimson as she pulled her eyes with her fingers to mimic mine, thought I was just another narcissist little bitch with her stinking lunchbox and ripe pussy for the taking. Right before that very moment, I believed myself to be a fragile flower, who'd wilt away in the heat of the sun if I'd exposed myself to her powerful heat. Then; for only an in-

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stant, I looked down at my two hands, I held them fast and cut their shaking. They formed into fists of rock, made of sentiment sediment so hard it could shatter even Jackie's face. I felt my entire body tense up like a spring, and my entire body twisted, then released in a big aching exertion... the bully's face turned into an empty hunk of meaningless flesh, and her teeth seemed no more genuine than plastic Halloween shit. She fell backwards and cry, cried, cried for sympathy. I felt so much disgust for her that all humanly feeling fled my body, and I landed another blow on her head the way you'd crush a stupid shitty little bug with your foot. A teacher pulled me away, down 'twards the exits; I looked around and noticed that the riotous screaming had turned to stunned silence. As the police officer and the principal ran down the hallway towards me, I looked down at my still, bloody fists and felt nothing stir in my heart of hearts. I felt no fear. I haven't felt it since. Every single moment since then has felt fake like reality TV."

At the bottom, there's a bleeding heart with a dagger through it, flanked by two little smiling kitten faces.



Synopsis

natalia wanders the zone populated by paramilitaries, influencers and the children of napalm and static breeding across the desert until even its sands dye into the blue-light glimpsed before artillery fire



Last Time

the zone flickers with stylized executions by modified assault rifles and pistols, a world abandoned by the old, while yelena and christine remains in throes between teenage riots



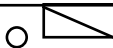
CW: tobacco, war, hallucination, kidnapping, alcohol, fire-arms

Through the window speckled with water, Yelena watched a procession of anonymous cars. A speaker above her ear crackled like paper, struggling to be heard over the alarms and clattering metal. "I'm taking a break!" Yelena shouted to no-one in particular. To her manager, changing the music or even switching it off created too much instability within the organization; it was an invitation for mutiny, a disavowal of authority. Through the motorik haze of afternoon traffic, she still hears their lyrics: have a good time, fall in love, tonite's gonna be the night. Even as a child she knew it; they had always been commands set to sound. Rigid, barking orders repeated so often that even a drumbeat brought about a conditioned response. She opened up the package, tearing clumsily at the plastic... it's so obvious she's looking for the habit, puffing without the sincerity people used to have. Her thoughts splatter

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onto the window like rain.

“You can’t smoke here,” the manager sez. Yelena walks down the boulevard, grandiose in its emptiness. In every direction, parking lots extended into the horizon. A river of black sludge ran through the cracks and breaks, forming puddles that shimmered like pearls. She felt a certain grief, as if a cherished memory had faded from her mind. The asphalt steppes seemed something like freedom when you could dot its peaks with teenage excess. But as the bones set and fat gives way to taut skin, nada, nothing at all becomes a boundary more impenetrable than steel. Oh-- Yelena, you were always a bother, and a bore. She takes a reluctant drag, and lets most of the smoke leave through her nose. Nothing new. There’s nothing new.

The inside of her car filled up with a haze of pizza fumes, stark and iconic yet nondescript like colored plastic. The cotton flaps of her uniform fluttered as the wind rushed through the window, and she gladly shivered along to the cold chill. Underneath the pained whistles of afternoon showers, thumping bass punched her stomach-- not much else could escape the speakers pounding within an inch of their life. One of her eyes is set on her phone, snug in its cradle above the center console. She records herself



while driving; she shakes her head, the music so loud it sounds like ice breaking under her weight. Seven viewers. It's yet her greatest hour. "In the future, everyone will be gay for fifteen minutes."

Yelena stood outside the condo complex glowing in the haze of her phone; her reckless speeding had given her a few restful minutes before the thirty-minute guarantee. She hadn't heard from her. Bitch. No little pop-up hearts, tender rejoinders; sand-kissed lips or a setting sun. She felt like a limb was missing from her, burning with phantom pain. "Bitch, stop ignoring me." A little knife. Worry trembling at the end. A few minutes have passed. Yelena takes the pizzas and climbs up the stairs deeper into the condo complex, decorated with fossil palms and sand-dressed masonry. The glows of televisions pour into the misshapen snake path of a walkway, forming squirming noise. Through one of the windows, she sees bodies disfigured by a blocky filter. The marque below it reads "NATO ISOLATES AUTONOMOUS ZONE." The marque disappears, quickly replaced by a steaming bowl of cheese. Yelena's been plagued by contextless phrases her whole life, anonymous foods, her own memory a fragmented series of headlines and computerized vapor. The words "NATO" were like a gaping hole in her room-- it's always



been there, but Yelena never wondered why. “23;” she takes a picture on delivery and awaits confirmation. NATO. Nay-toe. A meagre tip. She looks at the door of twenty-three, and fights every temptation surging into her body. “Fuck you, asshole;” said just loud enough to feel good.

Through the window, she sees images of children wearing camouflage, presenting their weapons with a grey veil behind them. Some of them carry proudly icons, of Godliness or material wealth. Others carry only their hungry eyes, animated by helicopter fuel rippling over jagged rocks. “Christine; bitch where are you?” A building is taken by a cloud of fire, made of the most beautiful gold she’d ever seen. Suddenly humans repopulate the screen-- a man dressed in camouflage sets his pistol to the temples of a child. Both of them are laughing. A cathedral is enveloped by fire. A faint impression of orange and red remains, then conquered by a glistening slab of beef.

“Yelena,” she heard through as she walked up the stairs. She imagined her mother sitting at the door after seeing her off, resting comatose ‘till the evening’s return. “Yelena, privjet;” Yelena’s mother opened the door with only slight trepidation, scanning every corner for foreign signals. “Yelena... hurry up, come eat.” Ripping off her



pizza-stained uniform didn't do away with the stench, it still festered in Yelena's nostrils where it dripped down to her aching belly. "I'm not hungry, mom." Yelena's mother poured a cabbage soup and set it beside a plate of something swimming in mayonnaise and garlic. "I'm not hungry." Yelena insisted, half-relenting as she sat by the table decorated beautifully with rose-tinted lace and a single rose in a vase. "Did you have a good day at work?" Yelena's mother asked as she filled a cup with juice. Yelena tried to swallow some of the soup, squirming as it burns her throat. A voice was screeching in the living-room, piercing to the ears in the way only the speaker of a phone could be. "Did you hear, Lena, about this?" Yelena stuck her fork into the mayonnaise and garlic, prodding its silvery shapes. "They have these, I guess children, going into a war zone. They take pictures, videos; they do shows in front of burning buildings and hostages." Yelena's face steadily melted into her upright hand; her spoon an oar in steaming waters. "No-one goes to school these days. They all want to be special entertainers, and they want to be number one." A mushroom floated peacefully. "They have all these rappers on the internet with guns. They say, 'kill police with guns, it's the best thing in the world.'" A piece of potato floated to the top before crumbling away. "I tell you, Lenchka; these times are for Satan, and only Satan. No man can



fight the battle against hell. Even the strongest one.” Yelena takes a spoonful of soup and lets it fall back into the bowl. Did her mother change? Or did she change? Yelena felt disappointed in herself for once thinking of her mother as wise and worldly. “And of course, NATO... nothing. They shake hands like they do with Mladic.” There it was again, “NATO.” Nay-toe. It felt like a primordial trickster God had suddenly revealed herself, stripped of the dark veil of anonymity. Who was NATO, to do something? Was NATO the hand of chance? “What will people do? How can anyone live with rappers pointing guns in their gardens for the cameras? Where are their parents?” The face of Yelena’s mother had become red with fury, only barely constrained by the warm sweater she enveloped herself in. “Finish your soup, Lena.”

The emptiness of her room felt welcoming. There was stillness here; the walls bare, unassuming, unmolesting to the senses. Yelena had gotten into the habit of cleansing herself every month, throwing away pictures and tchotchkees, scrubbing the dirt of luck. She sat on the frame of the open window, her feet pressed up against the metal rail. Beneath her, the city hungrily screeched with its alarms and sirens, engine rattles, screams-- the sound of metal folding like flesh. She looked at her last three,





four messages to Christine; unseen, offline. Her mother's ranting, and the crimson blocks oozing with suggestion-- they seemed to mean nothing, unburdened everything carried on. The hum she heard in her phone charger suddenly grew louder, louder until it overwhelmed everything else. She walks to her desk, the yearbook open and his picture papery and vulnerable. Nirvana hung beneath his speckled face. "Elon Rao," she mumbles. "I'm so fucking bored;" his blog likewise was bare and full of banal observations. The size of the town insects. The smell of shit and piss, trickling in every alleyway. Weekends that disrupt the tedium only with drinking, and drinking. "Holy fuck! I've been staring out the window for days. Nothing! Nobody comes by. Bullshit! I want there to be something, something happening. Some action!" Burdensome blood in her legs, she put on her yellow raincoat and quietly tip-toed by her mother's door; cloaked in the noise of distorted folk song, she put on her heaviest boots and stepped out into the dark.

And now the city laid before her, bare-- there in its dark alleyways, its vomit and steam, your eyes shy away like nudity. She buried her face in the calming breadth of her raincoat, safe from the neon and halogen that turned the sky into a blank screen. She walked by an old church



and was struck by visions of how it must have once been; their skins coarse, eyes feverishly set upward. Now it's a mall, cleansed. An endless corridor of identical stores, their oppressive icons hovering above like hungry dogs. A lonely factory flame burns for an instance on the horizon. Yelena harbors these fantasies of fire enveloping the streets. It washes away the automobiles, turns them liquid, back to malleable metal. She wishes she was the factory flame, brilliantly blue, lighting up the sky if only for an instance. A few drunkards share a bottle in the parking lot, two lovers kiss beneath the McDonald's sign. She wanted to turn everything she saw into that flame, to turn herself inside out and thus turn the world inwards. A boy tumbles to the ground, his face spurting blood as his skateboard rolls away. A few skyscrapers itch at the opening to heaven, long antenna fingers waving in the wind. A few girls only a little younger than her shout carefree, exchanging insults as their pale faces surround a single screen, lips red with ketchup, caked with salt; dirty, dirty empty alley the only refuge from the probing oppressive glows of the global mall. She searches for a piss trickle, her nose poised, anything that could tarnish those clear windows and dustless counters. There's no piss here-- it's been scrubbed of its humanity.





But there through a glittering haze of neon lights, Yelena sees the various shapes itch & jitter there in the strobo-hallways, 'tween the gaming machines and pornography. To her, every machine was like a pillar from a forgotten time, etched with the symbols of forgotten languages and worship. The revolting lights congealed like sugary cereal dissolving into the bright white milk. And the sounds, truncated 'till they were only shrill suggestions, wept like ghosts stuck in a cathode vacuum. Ah... well, a pool of blood fills the screen and solicits an angry shove before the inevitable surrender of quarters. These arcades, built from neglected refuse, now formed a monastery away from the ever-seeing eyes of phones & computers-- at least until you snap your high-scores. She looks for quarters on the floor; excitedly, she jabs the button of the machine a little too hard and a bright crimson can comes flying out. Even the sound of the tab crunching brings bliss. Its taste, an anonymous confederacy of flavors, suggesting nothing recognizable or real. A little congenital dagger in her brain shifted, waves of anger flooding her brittle wrists.

Yelena takes a hold of the joystick. A rainbow is born, then pours down a pixel drain. The screen becomes filled with disfigured hostiles, and a single tearful civilian squirming 'tween them. She knows all the tricks-- white



hot dots turn the black flicker of the background into a bloodbath, and a distorted bell rattles the cabinet for every thousand weighed in gore. Two snakes surround her, their tongues wet with blood. Everything shook, like a nervous dream. A nightmare of shapes, too coarse to hold in your fingers as their definition so quickly slips away. When she closed her eyes, she could still see them fucking in an orgy of red. Memory and desire become identical. Once a body is chewed up by ROM, it's no longer living. In reverberation powered by DSP circuits, in the dismemberment of abstract shapes, ghosts blend together into nothing like inorganic sugary drinks. "Are you there?" She asks as her finger jitters, face sharpened by flickering sparks-- "are you really there?" They all fall dead, drowning and then dissolving into blood. The room shifts to reveal its facade, to reveal ten other rooms. A lone figure escapes her bullets, swaying 'tween the meat. She turns to Yelena, the polygons contort into a smile.

"What's your name?" Yelena asks of the figure there in the three-screened chamber. She wears latex, or leather; she makes a pose of violence, of vulnerability, a glance to the side. Thousands of little bones rattle along. "What's your name?" The figure doesn't respond. Behind her, a house is leveled by a single tank shell. With every





clustering explosion, her eyes quivering more vigorously. “You know my name,” a distorted voice calls. LIFE. BULLETS. TIME. “Christine?”

“I think you know who I am,” the figure responds with a whisper that echoes through every speaker. “I’m the one you see in your dreams.” Yelena reloaded by pointing the gun away from the screen, pulling the trigger; she takes aim at her face and fires. “I’m the figure that keeps showing up. I’m the bad habit. I’m the sleepless nights, given life through flat planes.” A fighter jet comes howling through the forest, its engines ablaze. She passes from one game to another, changing only her mangled shape. Yelena takes aim and fires. The screen becomes riddled with fuzzy holes. “I’m a nightmare the world cannot wake up from.” A field of green is leveled by brilliant flames; the birds twitch with burdensome broken bones. In the next game, her lips take on a brilliant sheen as if kissed by a pearl. Yelena takes aim and fires. The glass will not shatter, even though the foundation refuses to hold. “You’re dead - game over!” Her body collapses into a clump of jagged meat.

When the mask slipped off her face, Yelena’s eyes throbbed with pain. The world was reborn in hot, white



heat.

"Where am I!" she yelled. The light had brought life back to her tired body. She thrashed around, trying to free herself from her bondage. Her hands were tied to steel, her limbs brittle and light. She heard laughter, faint 'tween the grinding engine noises and the abrasive trance strings. She smelled iron. "Where am I!" she yelled again. The white heat slowly gave way to empty stretches of solitary green, in the shadow of icy mountains where white mists fell gently over secret valleys. The emptiness of the forests made her heart thump with anxiety. The ground turned to raw clay beneath her feet.

"Relax, shorty!" The man riding shotgun raised his head through the window, though covered by black cotton which constrained his shouting. "We taking you somewhere fun." Yelena tugged on her rope, trying to maintain her balance through the turbulent miles. She had a horrible headache, and could not remember how she'd come to such a wretched fate. Beneath her feet, the bed of the truck was black with dried blood. Vomit flooded her mouth.

One of the men pulled her from the truck by her arm, roughly but not without care. Yelena kicked her cap-





tor in the leg, bit him in his arm, soliciting a groan of pain and a giggle from the other man. "Agh, jobanoje atrodje blyad;" he muttered through pained teeth. She went slack, unsure of whether to reveal she'd understood what he'd said. "Ona sabatchka," the other said with a laugh before pinching Yelena's cheeks. Yelena was suddenly aware of her weak, underdeveloped body. "Let's go," they barked while carrying Yelena into a bunker covered in weeds and sticks. Suddenly the world disappeared again, and Yelena whimpered in fear. The two men opened a door, dropped her onto the carpeted floor, and undid the rope binding her wrists. "Please, do not leave;" one of them shouted before locking the door behind her.

Though her hands were free, they still throbbed with pain. Yelena felt at her arms, tracing with her fingertips the sore wounds left on her. She looked around. The room was full of books, covered with black dust. A small window at the ceiling provided a shaft of light. The walls were unadorned concrete, decorated only with electrical cables. She was not alone, as a few bodies laid on the floor with pillows and blankets. "Hello?" she whispered. She crouched down, unsure of what would pounce out of the dark. "Hello?" Someone groaned, another yawned: "you new here?" The voice was American, nasal and lilting.



"Yeah," Yelena answered. "Where am I?" The voice didn't respond, she merely heard shifting and sudden snores. Was she dead? Stuck in the waiting room of purgatory? Yelena touched her own face, pressing into her bruises. She feels as if her entire life had been hurtling towards this dark tunnel. She recounted her last hours; the early morning flight, nerves rattled by turbulence. Looking for him in his face, honesty in its cruelty. The arguing, the bargaining. Hiding underneath a sheet that did away with the sky. Hearing the gears crank beneath her. She felt proud of her own hysterical strength. Her pride quickly drowned in self-loathing. Lemmings show bravery too. Yelena surprised herself by letting a giggle slip from her lips.

She laid down beside one of the blanketed figures. Anxious without a point of fixation, she stared at the patch of light illuminating the carpet. The figure beside her stirred, rising with a yawn. "Woah, what's up. What's your name? I'm Alec, what's your name." Yelena only saw faint glimmers of his eyes, still and hollow. "Lena. I'm Lena. I just got here. I don't know where I am." She heard a minor chuckle from Alec, who shook his head like a wet dog. "You're in daycare. Did you tell 'em your parents' phone number?" Yelena tried to smile back, keep up the facade of youthful cool. "My mom doesn't know I'm here. She



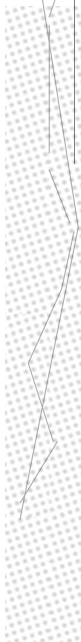
thinks I'm at camp." Alec scratched his eyes, "cool. Good. Hey, just sit tight. Uh; try to keep your eyes away from the door." Yelena looked at the plywood door, quiet 'n still like it was just begging to burst. She stammered a little bit-- a few of the shadows in the room rose from their sleep, like corpses rising from a grave. Her thumping heart kept her from laying down. Yelena took out her phone, furiously scrolling for a picture. "Have you ever seen this girl?" Alec pressed his hands into his eyes, pained by the brightness. "She's a dime. Korean?" Yelena shook the phone. "Have you ever seen her? Christine. Her name's Christine Leung."

Alec smiled, and scratched his face. "Yeah. Sure, I've seen her." A small smile broke across Yelena's face, its life cut short by horrible apprehension 'n doubt. "You're just saying that," Yelena murmured. She looked at Christine, an old impression of Christine. A grey beach lay behind her, shimmering with dead shells. A sharp little tooth showed itself from her mouth when she smiled. Yelena's concern had deformed into obsession. That sharp tooth yearned to stick itself into something huge and fleshy, to tear through its fragile collagen and upset its boundaries. To make an incision, from which salty white froth can leak out and trickle through cracks and rifts. A dribble of pearls, joyful haemolymph. Christine on a horse, Christine in her lacrosse jersey, Christine with soft moist lips holding a cup,



Christine with the cowering look, the roving eye-- what use are these images when we all drown and dissolve in the same homogeneous gravy? Yea-- let the froth flow, an overwhelming torrent of love that sucks everything into it.

There was a froth in the bottle. Christine sucked for a few seconds, then wiped her mouth with her hand. "Gimmie that thing," Yelena handed her the miniature handle of rum. One burble, two; the rum glucks like a sore throat, pouring into the coke bottle. Yelena giggled, then yelped in concern. "That's way too much. Stop!" Christine whispered, her face glowing red hot like flaming coal. She indulged in dirty words, rap couplets; an old woman besides them rolled her eyes. Smudged flames came through the wet glass of the subway car. Christine sucked on the bottle again; one burble, two. A loud bellowing burp and a harsh cough. Yelena looks down the aisles of the car, twisting as they follow the curve of the rail, the horizon at its very beginning shifting and uncertain. Dark drops of coke spilled onto Christine's sweatshirt. "What should we do?" "Bout what?" "No, like tonight." The phone buzzed. The crystalline fuzz of a distant mall appeared to Yelena like a slumbering creature. "Drink the rest of this-- hit the arcades." The metal beneath them groaned. Christine gave Yelena the bottle, she tried to fight the sensation rising





up her throat as she sucked on the sickly-sweet mixture. They looked out the window, at each other reflected in the window, at opposite sides. Towers of steel rose into the sky, encrusted, rusted by blood. A man slept in a pool of spilt beer, his feet touching a metal pole. The tremor in her heart has grown, paralyzing her with deafening sound; demanding to be heard over everything else. She looked at their photo-booth pictures, arranged in a line of four... Christine's sharp teeth, puckering lips, crossing eyes; almost suffocating Yelena who beamed from the background. Her love was rooted in jealousy, it seemed to Christine that being alive was reason enough to keep living. Yelena takes another suckle, fighting the urge to vomit. "Bitch," Christine yelped with a smile while she undid a knot in her hair.

There was a knock at the door. Alec shouted back, "we ain't got no keys." There were a few moments of silence, and then an explosion of splinters erupted from the door. Frightened, Yelena tried to form herself into a ball. Two boys dressed in shiny red Adidas tracksuits strutted in, casually waving around their pistols. "Bro, let's go;" one of them shouted. "Moskies coming peligroso." Alec rose from his blankets, a gold tooth visible in his haggard smile. "Hold up, let's take her," Alec pointed at Yelena... she rose from her ball, unsure whether she was saved or



damned by his sudden affection. “She’s cool. Don’t want her getting fucked up.” The others rose from the shadows but the two boys stabbed the air with pistols poised like spears, pushing away the others. Yelena followed the boys back through the same dark path, this time hot and smelly with iron. The walls were stained with gunpowder. She heard the wetness beneath her feet, but she kept her eyes to the jagged ceiling. Did they have little ambitions? Were they ever burdened with complicated dreams, or intrusive thoughts? She could not imagine for them an interior, as much as she tried. The room was draped in black. She could not imagine anything; the mind atrophies in fear.

Outside, she saw her desolate surroundings. Re-born again these empty peaks, devoid of anything except rotting shrubbery. The heat spewed down into the canyon, filled with smoke. She took a deep breath, her throat pained by the chill; Nay-toe had spared her for a reason far beyond the troubles of her scale. Behind her, she saw others come out from the darkness of the bunker with pained eyes & shrieks like new born chicks. She looked away; she saw Alec pick up a bag of chips from a pile of food, tearing it open and pilfering a few before throwing it back onto the burnt soil. It was as if all of Yelena’s old thoughts were just a teenage dream, pricked ‘n gone when the alarm rang.



She blew her nose into her sleeve; the snot was glistening with fresh blood.

A beat-up sports car sat further down the sandy trail, its brilliant red dulled by mud and dents. A plastic bag shook in the wind where there should have been glass. Smoke rose from the base of the mountain, down the road, hidden in the blue shadow. One of the boys grabbed onto Yelena, his breath heavy and cool on her neck. His hand reached for her breast, if only to rudely taunt, as his face remained taut and disinterested. He pulled off her heavy jacket and stripped her of her cash and phone. He pressed his gun into her stomach. "My bad... we just need it more than you." Alec smiled as he opened the door for Yelena; "that's fucked up," he said between hoarse chuckles. The boy pulled Yelena towards the car, and Alec gave her a reassuring pat on her shoulder as she entered the car. Little icons hung from the rear-view mirror, and dozens of scratched up CDs crunched under Yelena's feet. Alec sat beside her, and the two boys took the forward seats. A twist of the key, a purr comes from the troubled engine and a sudden assault of hi-hats fills Yelena's ears with pain. "Where are we going!" Yelena shouted, pulling herself between the two boys. The two boys didn't respond. She looked back at Alec, who merely smiled and shrugged



his shoulders. Unsure of their fate, but horny and willing, they rode down a path of hot sand into a white, empty mist.

"So where you from, shanti?" Alec mumbled as he rolled a fine combination of tobacco and verde. "You Chinese or something?" The driver laughed hoarsely, spitting out the window as stones 'n sand churned underneath his wheels. Yelena pushed up against the roof of the car while the music degenerated into repetitive stutters, feeling her stomach sink deeper with every turbulent weeping bounce. "No. I'm from the Bay, the Bay Area." Alec nodded his head before licking on the paper. "Nice, Biscayne, love it there." Yelena swallowed her words... it didn't matter which bay, the meaning of names dissolved in the acid of the NATO Autonomous Zone and all that remains is little islands of liquid color. Alec stuck the joint into his mouth, then slowly pulled it free, soaked in spittle. "You know, they got their own speaking here," Alec mumbled as the flame of his lighter crackled at the tip of his joint. "I know, they got the Russian thing, but another one too... people speak all kinds of shit here. Right, Ruslan?" Alec knocked the sleeping boy in the passenger seat, his shoulder wet from collected saliva. "Speak a little for our friend here," he presented the joint to the boy with his fingers. "Say,



brat; me searchin' na tuzlu truc." The boy stuck the joint in his mouth, fumes rising from his nose, then formed his hands into a gun. "Davai!" Yelena saw figures shimmer through the trees on the horizon. The rifle lying on the center console was inscribed with "Fabrique Nationale," its metal lizard green. The driver knocked the dashboard with a fist and pressed 'Next,' the stutters surrendering to high chirping vocals and sharpened brass. Even here, Naylor breathes.

They passed by a sign steeped in rust, scratched out and defaced with a new name: "TayGeneration," a name defaced by daggers and skulls, crossed out letters, other fragments of broken words, injured letters. Children run by with their feet tamping the hot mud, swampy waters girded by plastic and aluminum containers. Alongside the glowing river were encampments made of discarded Styrofoam and IKEA wood, wallpapered with food packaging and merch. See how 'tween the reeds, there's old tour t-shirts; "BabyGirl7 Alive!" hanging from the pole and they cross their hearts for the national anthem, underneath the canopy of the forest. They parked in a patch of hard grime, packaging cracklin' 'neath their feet. They left the car behind and travelled up the river of Coke on foot, exchanging glances with those living another child's teenage



dream. "The dream never dies," she's smiling and a soda fizzes beneath her. Alec pressed into Yelena's ribs from behind; in the intimate space between them, he hands her back her phone. "You'll need this in the auto zone." They stopped at an energy drink spring, flowing downwards from the factory further up the mountain. Yelena brought her lips down to the effervescent purple; it tasted like raspberry. "Somehow it keep flowing," the boy said as he rinsed his mouth with the sticky-sweet liquid. "They say its Nay-toe, keepin' the drink flow." Alec giggled, spitting some of the drink out on the grass. "Auto zone's flooding with energy drink, guns, merch; only the essentials." "Nay-toe provide," the driver said, speaking for the first time in a lowly hum. Yelena hadn't even noticed the bedazzles on their weapons, shimmering there on the forest floor. "If Nay-toe provides you everything, what are you boys doing with those guns?" Alec giggled; one of the boys took out his cock and started pissing into the fizzy stream flowing down through the encampments.

The boys had left to sell the weapons they'd pilfered from the bunker: "a couple ay-kays, some 'nades, real coddly shit. I even jacked some knives." Yelena followed the piss-smelling stream and listened to the people speak as they ground up potato chips and beef jerky for soups





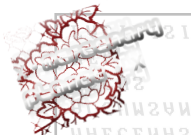
and stews. They spoke in argot; if they'd talked in phrases before, it had disintegrated into brand names and buzzwords, a speak belonging not to a people, a race, a nation-- no, it was merely a device, a means. Like a discount store, the words of the world were thrown into a heap, packaged in dead plastic, and discarded when no longer of use. Each tribe had their own speak; borrowed Korean, half-remembered lyrics, vague metaphors for sex or drugs. Alec sez they're like passwords: "say the wrong shit in the wrong place and you're losing your phone," a form of exile. TayGeneration felt like a Korean colony, though the colonizers existed only on a tiny screen. The air smelled like red chili paste, and statues fashioned out of posters and clothing store mannequins marked their territory. "Stan BabyGirl!" a few boys sitting on a burnt chassis cried. The energy drinks had rotten away their teeth, and their smiles were blood red. A girl took selfies with each of them; her phone shone pristinely, without a single mark or blemish on its champagne skin.

She'd fallen asleep in a sea of packaging when the gunfire had awoken her. Alec had walked down to the base of the river to steal some food, but never returned. There had been gunfire before; it had been sporadic, cautious. Now the entire forest rattled with percussive sounds, sput-



tering across the moss-covered rocks and burnt wood. At first she'd felt it was a dream, each pop a piercing of her thoughts. The image slowly returned, fire burning in her retinas. The horizon, once covered in plastic towers and wooden huts, now itched with bright flames. It was so still, so silent; she heard a bird twitter beside her, a lone insect crawling on the branches. She scratched her eyes. A boom interrupted her daze; her eyes became rattled with terrible pain and she sprung into a frenzied run, tears streaming down her face as green sludge stuck to her ankles. Her back fizzled, fried; she felt heat on her ears and the deep, rumbling thunder did away with everything. Just as it was born, now the world dies in hot, white heat.





by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher Mcdonell

MERCENARY PLANET

Name: Ajax Lillywhite

Birthday: June 12

Sex: male

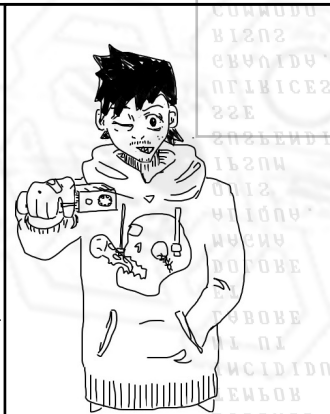
Occupation: NEET/aspiring petty criminal

Likes: caramel coated popcorn, stimulants, anime abridged series, target practice, mid-2000s FPS games, music while high, success stories, staying out all night in the fields, life-or-death risk, things he can't have

Dislikes: having to drive everywhere, cheap beer, incuriosity, cop guns, patronizing people, job hunting

Blood type: B

Theme song: Hard K - Full Throttle



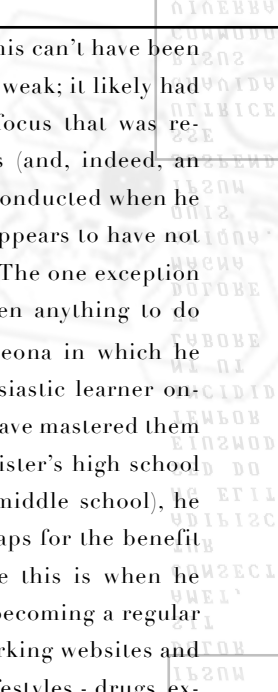



POI datafile

This POI should be a much more pliable subject than his sister, in theory. Commander Richmond would like to note that that's a big "in theory". First of all, turning against his sister overtly would appear to verge on the impossible. Leona's transition, at a time when Ajax was socialized almost exclusively by typically homophobic rural high school boys, should have alienated him

from the older brother he looked up to as much as anything our psychological teams can orchestrate, and instead may have actually made them closer. It is unlikely he will ever admit this, but Jax had shared Leona's music Tumblr with a number of friends, stopped associating with them shortly after sharing it, and had rumours that he was a "faggot" spread around several school Snapchat channels.

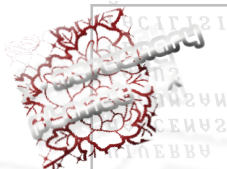
This is when he struck up a close friendship with local druggie Alistair Keyes [see next document].

This was, however, more or less the first and only time Jax stood up to peer pressure so overtly. Jax picked up a moderate interest in all of his sister's childhood interests but seems to have lacked the capacity for isolation to pursue them in the depth she did. This did not mean he was ever especially popular. He played a different team sport almost every year, and in at least one Facebook exchange was promised he could continue hanging out with his team members on the condition that he didn't fuck up their scores



next season. Based on gym records, this can't have been because he was especially physically weak; it likely had more to do with the same lack of focus that was remarked on by many of his teachers (and, indeed, an in-school psychological assessment conducted when he was 6, which suggested ADHD and appears to have not been followed up on by his parents). The one exception to his difficulties seems to have been anything to do with guns, a shared interest with Leona in which he seems to have been the more enthusiastic learner online, although it's unlikely he could have mastered them physically without her. During his sister's high school delinquent phase (while he was in middle school), he seems to have played very safe, perhaps for the benefit of family stability. At the same time this is when he started spending more time online, becoming a regular on 4chan's /k/ and /out/, as well as lurking websites and forums devoted to various extreme lifestyles - drugs, extreme sports, raving - almost all inaccessible to him. He even had Tor browser installed, though he uninstalled it and wiped his hard drive quickly a few months after downloading. His online rabbit holes seem to have al-

lowed him to affect a worldliness that became a source of social currency, significantly widening his friend group (not only beyond that of his own childhood, but anything Leona ever managed) in high school, where he embarked on an even sharper downward trajectory than she had as soon as she left (even before meeting Alistair). He was nearly held back a grade for cheating on an exam, and starred in a local viral video showing up to class intoxicated. Jax graduated the year Leona moved back, deferring his acceptance to Montana State University, and has since abandoned a string of job opportunities secured for him by his father. His current illicit venture with Alistair is the latest of a string of get-rich-quick schemes, including a months-long effort at building a brand as firearm influencers on Youtube, which revealed a powerful work ethic provided he is allowed to direct himself, but burned out after their channel was demonetized over a meme video that was interpreted as threatening a minor Soundcloud rapper.



Synopsis

clinging to a single desperate prayer, leona meets halation, a visitor from that supposed better world once held remote by the thousands of atrocities that littered the earth, and draws war and peace towards a collision spanning the galaxy.

Last Time

returning from the city after losing delilah and breaking up with mai, leona returns to the domestic tensions and half-violences of middle america, her refuge in those far-away stars whose constellations mai spoke of until she finds a being reaching out to her too



CW: firearms, war, trans chaser, emotional abuse, religion, cult abuse, radical feminism

A lilac-coloured crescent of coruscated matter, something in between hard flesh and soft stone, floats in the eye of a storm. From point to point it is almost long enough to scrape the edges of the churning red and black bruise of cloud. Lightning bolts reach out from the clouds to each of its points, several arcs at a time branching and reconnecting, like tethers attaching and detaching. Along the length of the crescent, translucent bubbles rise and fall like breathing, though each breathes in its own rhythm. The “sound” of the many pulses through the whole, a polyrhythmic heartbeat I can hear, feel, in something deeper than any sensory organ. I am connected to it even though, in the dream, I am seeing it all from outside. I am connected to it as they all are, all the beings I see as waving fronds and crosses and wings. Smaller than the bubbles, these

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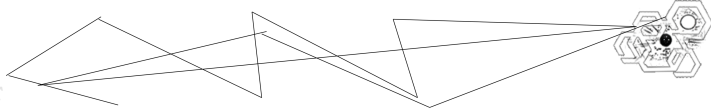
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GRACE & EFFORT



line the surface of the crescent like microscopic hairs, though having seen them in real life I know they are closer to my own size. They aren't the only things on the surface. In trenches or ridges between the bubbles, there are more things than I can process at once, scribbles by a mathematically prodigious child or supercomputer. There are more of the cross things than anything else, and they are everywhere, in places other life does not go. They move across its surface, very slowly, and intertwine fronds one to one or in groups, tips simply touching and mingling or in more intricate patterns like cat's cradles, some so intricate you can barely tell the basic body shapes underneath. Others curl up and unfold their wings towards the window of sky, catching light on the shimmering membranes. Others are perfectly still, perched on cubes of light grey stone. The ones on the cubes are thinking more, experiencing more than the ones doing anything else. Some of them are larger than any one cross. The largest, bigger than any of the bubbles, big enough to be noticeable on the silhouette of the crescent against a particularly wide thunder-flash, is pinned down in a depression near the centre of the crescent by several slime-blobs at each of its corners (there are creatures of a similar slime in the forests, but none that size) and has about three dozen crosses clinging all over it, swaying. A number of creatures that look like vertical starfish attached at the lower two points to horizontal disks float deliberately around it. In incredibly intricate melodies





and counterpoints, in voices like MIDI keyboards, they sing to each other. It is the only sound in the entire ecosystem aside from thunder and wind. It is as alien and out of place here as it would be on Earth. Through things like tiny spiral horns at the ends of their tendrils, the crosses sing back.

For a second, the singing stops.

It changes tone, becomes more hurried and dissonant as the star-things stop drifting and bobbing, floating still in place. The crosses stand still and tremble. But it is not them, it is the cube that is shaking. Vibrating at first ever so subtly, but then in more and more violent spasms as if to shake them off. Stars and crosses from across the surface gather around it, while other creatures as far as they can feel it run away. Some attach other blobs to it; things like fungi; things like plankton; things like electrodes. Others remove them. It stops, then starts again. The music goes back to normal, then buzzes with tension again. Repeat on time scales I couldn't have made sense of watching were it not a dream; something like time-lapse; a sense of familiarity keeping me fixed on this one subtle, discontinuous, yet dreadful pattern out of all the other rhythms of colour and movement in what might as well have been a coral reef.

Then the singing slows down into a mournful keen-



ing harmony. It's not even a harmony that on Earth would be classified as mournful, but it's not necessarily a harmony that on Earth would be classified period. Yet it feels like the time when I was a kid and heard wolves from my bedroom and just thought about how lonely they must be in this world we had torn away from them.

Several of them disperse from the cube, flying across spaces vaster than they had appeared at first to other cubes, other concentrations of population on the floating crescent's rugged surface. Others cling more closely to the sides of the cube, almost still. Cross-things collapse and run down its side in rivulets, setting themselves up at a nervous distance, while others, conveyed by star-things or other creatures? automata? that look like winged drills, land on the cube and began interfacing with it, attaching smaller cubes or fractals of colour-changing ooze that spread and retract over its surface or branching structures like rooftop antennae. Action ripples over the surface of the floating giant, including to other cubes, which send out their own ripples of anxious motion, in which it is impossible to tell what is alive or simply moving. Tall structures so like trees I could have almost put the word to them fold up around the crosses now hanging from them, unfurling cells of crystalline armour that cluster in cones around their central axes. Even the pulsing of the bubbles speeds up and becomes



irregular, and the whole bobs ever so slightly from end to end. The clouds churn, an uncountable baseline of time.

Then it happens, and it is so quiet I almost don't notice it has happened in the midst of all the other commotion. The giant cube cracks, from top to bottom. Nothing on or around it moves. Increasingly it becomes apparent, as the keening of the star-things starts up again, worse this time, high-pitched and dissonant, that nothing still attached to it can move. It cracks again, intersecting the first, then again. A baleful blue light is seeping out through the cracks. In smaller fragments, then smaller, but still holding together - then there is a horrible snap, so loud it's physically painful, and as the cube disintegrates into dust, the stone-flesh below it spasms. Things on its surface bend, fold, collapse as a ripple runs through it. A whole row of the bubbles tears, bursts. Every other cube cracks. The crystalline cones begin to lift off, as if pulled by invisible pulleys, towards the star-gap in the storm above, as does everything, winged or propellered or ballooned, that can sustain itself in the air. Like a cloud of spores from the surface - but not nearly enough. More spasms ripple through the surface. More bubbles blow open. There is now, bass drone to the stars' soprano, a groaning rising from the crescent-shaped giant as a whole, and it is beginning to tilt towards one of its ends, the lightning bolts shooting out from its end more erratic, a con-



stant mad discharge at one end and thin, faltering at the other.

Then I am up close to the crater where the cube had been - extending deep, at least as deep as another cube, as I can now see, into the thing's body. I am there; I am in the scene; I am a cross-thing, waving, desperate, and a star-thing is descending hesitantly towards me. Most of them have left, spiralling up into the funnel of motionless air, dots of colour on the white stain of the galaxy's arm. The air still has if nothing was happening, the storm not doing us the dignity of closing in on us. The star hovers near me, and I grab on. I relax the network of internal fluid and gas pressures that supports me in this shape and flow towards the matrix of small gaps in bottom of its disk. I spread throughout their body. My mind spreads throughout their brain. There is music everywhere. Everything I have just seen is gathered in one mournful symphony. I forget I can sense anything else, but take one last glimpse back behind me as they begin to lift off. The crescent, the creature, the city, the island, my world, is tipping on one end and sinking into the hole in the storm.

We had agreed to go back to the trap house an hour before his appointment with Alastair. At first it had seemed obvious to cancel, but Jax insisted Alastair was





someone we almost had to tell about an alien - he was a big conspiracy theory and UFO buff. And he was also the one who had helped Jax get a lot of the chemicals, so I grudgingly admitted he could be a valuable ally. Alastair lived on his own in the middle of nowhere and could do all kinds of shady stuff without attracting suspicion. But I had never met this kid. All I knew was that he had gotten my brother involved in shit that was irresponsible even by my standards. I wasn't going to expose our guest to another human without at least asking them. Telling Jax, like touching that puddle of prismatic sludge in the first place, had been a leap of faith I was immensely glad to have made, and had made my mind up upon waking with my head clear not to endanger by making any more. If I had been granted miracles, I thought, it was because I was someone who could be trusted not to take them for granted. Not to take anything for granted. And from the kinds of things Jax was telling me about Alastair, I had a compromise in mind.

Anyway, I could only care about Alastair so much. He wasn't the person I was looking forward to getting to know.

I hadn't heard them in my head since they had



formed in the bathtub.

When we went into the bathroom they looked like the same as yesterday, except they seemed to have drooped or shrivelled up almost imperceptibly. I might not have noticed if I hadn't seen so many of them in my dream, seen the subtle ways they moved while staying rooted in place. That was also how I knew they weren't dead - because there were no signs of life in the way of movement. They weren't doing well. "We're going to need more gas within a few hours."

"So, how do we talk to it?"

"Well... there's only one way I've done it before." I hesitated. I uncovered the gap where I had poured them in, which I had duct taped over. I lowered my hand in almost immediately, filling the space with my wrist, not wanting to let out more than a little of what gas was left. Maybe we should wait until we refilled the tank? but I didn't want to do anything until I could talk to them again. I didn't remember enough to know how to take care of them. The dream had made clear that I didn't have the slightest frame of reference on my own.

But by that same token, I wondered momentarily,



would they... understand?

The simple gesture of my hand curling, as if to take another human's hand?

There was several second's lag; and then the tendrils of one end of its cross extended, like plasticine squeezed out of a tube. Actually, I think I picked that metaphor because of its texture as much as anything else. It was a combination of soft and dry unlike any organic thing I had ever touched. But as we touched the ends ripped out into the prismatic liquid I remembered from last night, and as it spread over my fingertips, over my palm, up my wrist, I saw the rest of its body dissolving. I glanced back at Jax's eyes. Hollow with shock. They were the last thing I saw.

- Are you... OK with this...

- *What is this? Exactly? What are we doing? I want to help you, tell me what you need...*

And then, the first thing I saw. It was like waking up again. I was hyper-aware of the light filtering in from the windows of the shack through the bathroom door. I was hyper-aware of the angles of everything around me.



The colours of shadows. Spiderwebs. And of course, the bodies of my brother and his friend, which looked like new products of a character creator. But then I refocused on my brother's eyes. His mouth hanging slackly open.

"It's gone." Then, after trying to form words a couple more times, "it's inside you."

Yes. They echoed in my head, and I conveyed the message.

And now there was nothing for Alastair to see when he got here, except what we let him.

"The... species this is..." I hesitated, recognizing the new information in my head, "is a sort of symbiotic fungus. They normally live on a kind of... giant floating whale thing but can live in the body cavities of nearly any other lifeform that isn't toxic to it, connect their nervous system directly to the host's nervous system, and adapt its own metabolic process to reconvert digested materials from the host's digestive system, even if these were in their original form too alien for them to eat. They've adapted to several planets through this kind of symbiosis already. Although most of these were gas giants, and in our case our biologies are different enough that they'll



need to go back into their own body to breathe their natural atmosphere every 48 hours. And is going to need some other weird nutrients we're gonna have to figure out how to make sooner or later."

"...wow."

"Why are they here?" Jax cut to the chase. "Do they uh, come in peace?"

Peace. That was... a sore word. They hadn't known peace in so long they didn't think about before.

(But there was a perverse relief, that I felt guilty the moment I noticed, that the concept, such a subtle mesh of a concept I would have had to write a paper to explain, was familiar to them. That we had one line of communication as straightforward as a word.)

You can have peace here, if you want, I offered.

Is this planet at peace?

Well... there wasn't exactly a good answer to that, either, unfortunately.

(I had an ache where that concept was supposed



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B12N2
EVBVIDV
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2026END1
J12NM
DRI2
VRIDNV
WVENV
DOROVE
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FVBOVE
M1N1
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to be, too.)

“...towards us, yes.” I paused and gathered my thoughts again. “Their ship malfunctioned at the edges of our solar system.” It had been a purely technical malfunction, but it had arisen as a long-term result of physical damage. “They were able to guide it into our gravity well before its systems would have given out and it would have been lost in space forever. Hence the... crash-landing we saw.”

Well, Jax hadn't seen. I had been worried about what we would do about the pieces of the spaceship - there had been physical pieces in the field that night, the sort of glassy plates I'd seen on the tree-cone things in the dream - worried about Mom and Dad finding them and bringing first contact to an abrupt, violent end, like a parody of what they wanted to do to me - but when we got back, they had dissolved, or sank into the ground, or something. The plates were apparently an extremely simple liquid held together in a crystalline state by a kind of energy flow I had no idea if our science had words for; other parts, the “brain” of the ship, were fungal in a sense closely related to the alien themselves, and capable of the same dissolution, though they bonded to machines instead





of lifeforms.

“So you weren’t... looking to come here. Do you know about Earth? Like, have you visited before? Are UFOs...”

Jax was talking to them now, and I had a brief crisis over whose voice to respond in. I couldn’t let them “directly take over” and answer questions as themselves if I wanted to - they didn’t know their way around my brain, my language well enough. I was still amazed I was able to piece together as much as I was; every sentence felt like winging an exam I’d crammed for the night before.

“It’s on the star maps, it’s listed as having... sentient life and technology,” (the concepts they used here were far more confusing), “but it’s not a planet anyone at least in the... fleet they’re part of has paid much attention to. Mostly if a planet hasn’t discovered interstellar travel yet, planets with interstellar travel don’t visit or pay attention. It’s not exactly like a Prime Directive, it’s just like... how people from big cities don’t come out here a lot, I guess.” It was a complete guess! I hadn’t even tried to explain urban-rural dynamics to them, and had no idea if they had picked up on them just from being in my head for a few minutes. But they essentially... shrugged when



I said it, so maybe it was close enough? There was also something cultural about gas giant life not spending much time on land planets, but I couldn't get this clear enough to include it.

Jax nodded. "Makes sense. Oh man... I can't even think of questions to ask. Let's wait until Alastair gets here. He's going to know what to ask an alien." He paused. "Pleeease let us tell him. Like, if I made first contact and didn't tell him, he would kill me. I think he'd consider it a fundamental breach of our friendship."

I nodded. "We'll tell him, but not show him. So if he believes us, he can work with us. But if he runs to anyone else, they won't believe him."

I had slipped into 'we' without awkwardness or even thinking about it. There was something exciting about it.

We (the visitor and I) slid onto the ratty couch.

Jax hadn't even thought to ask: "Do you... does it... have a name?"

Their species "spoke" primarily by direct neural



connections, so for them “words” were more or less the same as “concepts” - a sort of mental abbreviation. This came down remarkably close to speaking in language

I woke to the silver Jeep pulling into the driveway.

And a name: Halation.

Alastair looked more like I expected than I had dared expect. With his bleach-blond bowl cut and heavy sunglasses, he looked like something out of a 90s gaming ad - which was probably his inspiration, I'd seen enough aesthetic posts like that on Tumblr, and his Hotline Miami shirt confirmed everything. His wrists and fingers so delicate (I knew girls who would kill for those hands) I couldn't picture them on a gun, but there it was slung on a single leather strap over one shoulder - the Zenith Z-5RS.

He bowed a little when he introduced himself, holding his hand out stiff and trembling like it was paralyzed, looking up over the shades as they tilted down. “I've - heard a lot about you.”

God, did Jax respect me or not? Did he know?



Well, Jax had said I wouldn't have to worry around him. And if I didn't have to worry, Jax wouldn't have had to worry either... and without someone to not worry around, who knows how much he would have worried. About me. Because of me. On one hand it didn't seem fair that I was something Jax couldn't just keep silence about, because that made me something that he otherwise had to keep silence about, not for me but for him, a secret; but better that he had talked to someone than collapsed into my parents' way of seeing me to deal with the pressure. "I hope you didn't hear anything that weirded you out."

"Not at all!" At that he lowered his sunglasses from his eyes, sliding them down his straight nose like some kind of runway, and looked up at me, so straight up he didn't quite meet mine. Staring somewhere between my hair and the sun he said, "I can see it."

"Huh? See what?"

"The real you. You still look like her."

I recoiled and caught myself. I didn't know whether to laugh or cough. He sounded... like a voice actor in a video game! Like a Metal Gear Solid voice actor! There was that kind of uncanny valley cadence like he



didn't quite understand what any of the words meant or didn't, on some pre-linguistic level, intuit what a sentence was. But it hadn't sounded prepared either. It had come spontaneously.

"I meant... about me and the alien."

Jax hadn't told him anything about the alien yet. I was changing the subject out of sheer awkwardness and nervous desire to move ahead with it.

He blinked. "Oh, you mean your... friend who makes all that space themed music? With the whole personal cosmology? That stuff's really cool."

He listened to Mai's music?! That ought to have been even more invasive, more of a red flag, but... honestly, 80% of my distrust melted away right then. My shoulders softened.

"I'm not talking about Mai. I'm hoping to tell Mai soon. But..."

"We made fucking first contact, man. For real. In this building." Jax took over from me.

I watched him reset emotionally several times per



second. Jax saying this was probably a lot heavier for him than me.

“Dead serious. You know I wouldn’t troll you about this.”

We retreated to the couch. Jax told the story as I’d told it to him, while I sank deeper and deeper down the cushions, staring up at the ceiling. Alastair looked periodically over at me, trying to gauge something of my reaction, and I tried to look more and more dead. Sleep was crawling back out from my hair.

He also asked about names a lot, as soon as I gave the alien’s name. Helpfully, their language was easy to translate as it didn’t use sounds or any other sensory signs and “named” things by associating them strongly with simple concepts, almost like a sort of mental hieroglyphics. The concepts, if I dwelt on them long enough, were usually translatable into words. Their planet, for instance, was called Contemplation.

When Jax got to the explanation I had given for why they hadn’t visited Earth, Alastair stopped him. “I mean... tourists don’t really come here,” he added skeptically. “But the government doesn’t exactly leave us alone.





Do you guys have like... deals with the government? Is it true that..." and he rattled off a bewildering list of conspiracy theories that all turned out to be, as I would have suspected at a glance, complete bullshit.

"The things out there aren't like... aliens like you've heard of anywhere, or could think of." I remembered the dream and momentarily shuddered trying to process it all. "They're not guys with big eyes or reptilians or even tentacle monsters. A lot of them people wouldn't recognize as life if we found them."

"What about... the things Mai talked about?" He paused. "I mean, I don't really know, like you do. I've just read the Soundcloud blurbs."

I understood that he had switched to a track of disbelief, an entirely reasonable one - he was assuming, at least for good measure, that I was playing the same game as her - and, despite never having understood it as other than a game, despite her having been clear about this with me when she had taken me home and started telling me about her home among the magnetic stars on her ceiling, it hurt to deny it. If she had been there, I would have found another way; I wouldn't have said it wasn't real.



Finally he narrowed his eyes and made eye contact with me (over his sunglasses). “What do they want? Do they want to go home?”

“They want...” And here an absolute storm of conflicted messages and desires hit me, some of which I wasn’t sure how to decipher. “I kind of want to be alone,” I confided. “It’s hard to absorb all this information while trying to answer questions. They have questions I want to answer. Can we just... hang out here for a while.”

“Got it. No problem. We were planning to play video games.”

This took me a second; there hadn’t even been a TV yesterday; but Alastair literally dragged a tiny archaic plastic cathode ray tube, along with a console that wasn’t the newest but wasn’t as old as the TV, in from the back of his truck (a substantial black pickup, the kind there were hundreds of men who’d look more grown into around here), and plugged it into the powerbar connected to the rusty generator.

“You were planning to show me the Zenith.” Jax sounded crestfallen.





“Do you wanna fucking scare the shit out of them first thing?” Alastair snapped back.

I couldn't tell how seriously he was taking any of this; except I knew that if he listened to Mai's music, he would play along even if he didn't believe me, and if he took her music seriously, he would play along with the care and kindness of someone who believed all the way. I wasn't sure I dared to hope for that much. (Hadn't I had enough to hope?)

This seems way too casual. The more I relaxed, the less relaxed I felt. And yet, I needed to relax.

Jax and Alastair slid an FPS game I hadn't seen anyone play since high school into the console.

What do you want to know? I asked Halation.

But for a while, they were silent. They were relaxing too.

I could feel their memories seeping into mine. Things that hadn't made sense to me before, from the dream, from their explanations, made sense now, if I thought about them.



“Dude, you look uncomfortable,” said Alastair, and slid off his end of the couch. He wasn’t wrong; my butt was hanging in the air. He positioned himself cross-legged on the gravelly floor in a lotus position. He looked like a gamer Bodhisattva. His eyes were almost unblinkingly focused on the screen, while Jax’s bounced back and forth between me, him and the screen. “Jax, move over, let her lie down.” Jax pushed me in a way I wouldn’t have let anyone else push me and all the way over on the arm of the couch. I moved over to where Alastair had been and lay down across the cushions, my hair brushing Jax’s lap. Alastair had left almost no heat in the couch. Was he a zombie?

The soldier didn’t move on the screen, the world moved around him, hallways churning and clanking into place.

“There’s a Zenith in this game, isn’t there?” Jax mused.

“Z5P, not Z5RS.” Alastair’s eyes didn’t move from the screen; but his arm stretched back, and brushed my foot that was dangling from the couch.

Enemy cyborgs with grenade launchers for heads



came around corners firing. When Jax and Alastair fired at them, the human jaws that jerked as their triggers unhooked bloodily from their barrels and the screen splattered red.

What is that.

It was the first outright question they had asked me since I had taken them into my body.

It's... not real.

I know. They had not-real things, although they typically plugged directly into them and fed the simulations directly into their nervous system. (Even at “lower” levels of technology, before their equivalent of the digital revolution or anything resembling “virtual reality”; there was a complex art history grounded in neurochemistry I wasn't quite sure I could wrap my head around.) What are they... simulating. What are they doing.

What I dreamed about. What you... escaped. War.

Has it reached here too then. There was a note of panic that made me almost sit up. What side are you on.

The event I had seen in the dream had been an



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23E
202BEND1
J12NW
D112
V11D1V
W1E1V
D11OKE
E1
T1V1OKE
W111
I1C1D1D1
L1E1B1V
E112WOD
2E1 DO
W1E E111
V1B112C1
10V
COM2EC1E
W1E1
211
D11OKE
1B2NW
T1V1E1V

act of war, a war they had hoped wouldn't come to their planet, Contemplation. The floating reef-whale (I choose to call it that because it was a single enormous animal, but one so deeply symbiotic it mostly lived off the waste and decay of the lifeforms that used it as an anchor in the atmosphere) they called home was a kind of religious community - everyone who lived there, apart from the wildlife, had lived a life of peaceful scientific, contemplative and poetic dedication to the tenets of the dominant religion - or something like a religion - on Contemplation, which they called Meteorology. The cube that had exploded, a sentient mineral quantum supercomputer, had been tapped as an asset by an "informational life" spy-form from another arm of the galaxy that had been dormant in it since it had been embedded in the reef a hundred years ago, and had sabotaged its own physical form along with every computer on the reef's network (computers powered by, and thus deeply enmeshed in, the reef's electrical circulation system) in exchange for being copied to a vastly more powerful network in Contemplation's rings. (The network had been disintegrated with sonic mining pulses in retaliation.) The suicide mission had been ordered to halt the research occurring on this particular reef - research the visiting Ahasurunu scientists (the star people) had finally found what seemed like a quiet, unsuspected place to conduct, on the





theoretics of developing a signal-jamming field to block something called the Causal Adipose. This blocking field, the Ahasurunu hoped, would help bring calm the conflict the Adipose had spread across the galaxy.

Not the same war. We have others.

Others? The panic was replaced by shock.

Lots of them.

Over what?

I floated the most common explanations of war - not that I found these especially convincing myself - through my head to see if they were even familiar. They weren't. Nobody on Contemplation, or the rest of the galaxy was that was familiar to Halation, had fought a war over territory, religion, ethnicity, political ideology or resources not only in Halation's lifetime (about 150 years - of an expected 500 or so) but in all the history they knew since interplanetary contact. Alastair's question about interstellar empire had been understandably confusing to them (though they had ultimately mapped it to what Contemplation held over its local nebula - a primarily diplomatic monopoly of resources and decision-making, maintained



in large part by strategic symbiosis). The factors I had listed were the stuff of ordinary politics, but this was conducted diplomatically, under the shared assumption that the galaxy had more resources than life that needed them; that in any sufficiently contentious territorial dispute, the side that backed down first could easily go somewhere else; that cultural differences bordering on incomprehensibility were the fabric of interstellar relations, and anyone who was uncomfortable with them could stay on their own home planet and not have to deal with them. And class warfare - another kind I was especially personally curious about - was not unheard of but fought largely with subtle control of information networks, more and less hierarchical and horizontal architectures fighting through local argument and proprietary code for control of enormous resource flows that were, ultimately, destined for everyone because it would be both an outrage, a blow to legitimacy, and a waste if anyone didn't get a cut. War was a historical tragedy or, more recently, a specific and seemingly unavoidable, despite everyone's best efforts, response to the Causal Adipose, which represented an exceptionally destabilizing combination of all factors.

I felt... simultaneously elated and deeply humiliated as this information sank into my brain. On one hand



the politics I had known I would be ridiculed for every time I ventured outside of specific social niches all my adult life were vindicated. War, slavery, nations, armies, empires weren't the basic cost of living in a world of other people whose views or needs or intentions might be different than yours. Aside from whatever this Causal Adipose was, the universe looked like Mai thought it did. In light of that, how was I supposed to explain anything about humanity? That this land we were living on, we were living on because of a war - hundreds of years ago, but only a generation ago to one of their species - where the last time members of our species discovered a new world with new people, they had stolen their land and exterminated them with diseases and sent them to schools to unlearn their culture by force because of differences as small as skin colour? That my entire life, my country - founded on this genocide - had been at war with a series of countries whose resources dwarfed its own, because when I was an infant, three thousand innocent civilians had died in an attack, not unlike the one I'd dreamed, on two buildings by religious extremists who didn't even represent those countries and had been funded and armed by our government to fight another country? (Not to get into any of the conspiracy theories...) And of course, that the chemicals currently keeping Halation alive not only had recently



2
LVCIG121
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B2W
0N12
VR10N4
WVENW
DOTOKE
E1
TVBOKE
W1 N1
1WCID1D0
1EML0B
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE ER11
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOTOB
1B2W
ROBEN

been destined for the production of drugs we used not really for pleasure the way, in my best memories, I remembered pleasure, but to numb ourselves to death (because - there were reasons you numbed yourself to death out here), they were produced on the other side of the planet in huge metal hives by thousands of tonnes a day by same workers every day, who might spend their whole lives there, not because they were needed for any special skill or expertise but because they never were rewarded with enough tokens of their right to exist as determined by a committee of faraway people they had no control over (depending on what part of the planet you were born in, different degrees of 'no control') to do more than trade them for the food and shelter they needed to live, as well as a variety of technological luxuries made by people in the same conditions they couldn't simply opt to forgo because outside of cities built to the specifications of more decision makers faraway, they couldn't obtain food or medicine or physical necessities, most of the land where you could live self-sufficiently was hopelessly polluted and/or set aside for other such projects by the people who were allowed to make decisions about the use of the machines that made the things like plastics and chemicals and the hormones I'd used to change my body to what I felt like it always should have been because there were ways you





could only live if you had certain hormones in your body, that were exchanged for tokens representing the hours the workers used the machines and given back to the workers but less than the hours they spent using the machines so the people who controlled them could exchange them for more machines so they could be given more tokens in exchange for the products by workers for other people with machines and -

I stopped. Halation had been silent with horror for several minutes.

Yeah. I've felt that way a lot.

While I had been... thinking, Alastair had backed up into the couch; the hair of the back of his head was now brushing my shoulder. And his arm was brushing my foot that was dangling off the couch - it had to be deliberate - it was at a subtly, but detectably unnatural angle - but his face didn't budge an inch from the game to indicate any cross-purposes.

Have you lost anyone? Have you seen people die?
Have you... killed?

I had lost people, not in war like on the screen in



front of us, not in war like in my dream last night but to this world, to this interlocking structure of endless quiet wars it was made up of. I don't know if you can understand - my family, by the standards you're used to, is a war. The city I lived in to get away from it is a war. We have peace, but it's a different kind of peace, it's a getting used to it. But then, that had been even more true for Mai than for me, and one of the things she'd told me she reminded herself to be grateful for was that she'd never seen war. She'd brought that up when I had been talking about strategy games. She'd read the newspapers, every single war story, when she was a kid. And then at 13, when she'd started cutting herself, she'd stopped -

We've suffered differently. I understand and I don't understand.

Tears sprang to my eyes. No one was looking at them.

I idly moved my foot around Alastair's elbow, prodding at it. Without shifting the position of the controller he took one hand off it, gripped my heel and started rubbing. I was startled to feel a practised awareness of the bones, soft points, pads. I relaxed into it.



The Causal Adipose was alien science that made my head spin, but it seemed to amount to a means of instantaneous communication, independent of space or the speed of light, that worked by modifying reality itself - or the “low-level information processing of space”, whatever that meant - at connected nodes. Primarily this was used by computational lifeforms, which could use it to transmit themselves across space and reproduce themselves. Many computational networks regulated these capacities closely - their capacity for endless growth and replication led to precarious balances of power, usually sustained over millennia. And bodied civilizations feared the advantages it would give computational networks that used it. The alteration of reality itself was controversial at the level of even the baseline ethical and philosophical principles by which interstellar differences were mediated. At the furthest extremes, both sides saw each other as an apocalyptic threat to cosmic civilization itself - the Adipose had been invented to compensate for cosmological inflation, which would eventually make all interstellar contact impossible, but with sufficient energy its mechanism could theoretically have far more dangerous effects on the space around its nodes than mere communication necessitated. It was a lot more complicated than that, like the War On Terror or World War 1 was more complicated than I... even



knew how to explain in this half-deliberate confusing way yet.

“Hey what the fuck are you doing?” Jax’s voice broke the non-silence.

“I told you about the massage shit I was learning on Youtube bro. I told you I would do it on you but you wouldn’t let me.”

“Yeah because it’s gay as hell and that’s my sister.”

“Leona, tell him this isn’t gay.”

“Yeah dude, you should let your bro play with your feet, obviously, what are you, a hick?” If I had been in a different state of mind I might have kicked Alastair in the face by now, I had done as much over less and at an earlier stage of my life considered myself obligated to, but the sheer weirdness, the hiccuping laughter rising in my chest, my brother’s face shifting several times per second, were all anchors in being human I appreciated right now.

It was over in a second anyway. Jax bent down, dropping his controller outright, and crossed his arms



across Alastair's throat, pushing his pale neck up into his chin, his forehead rolling up with strain and destabilizing his glasses. "H-hey, fuck, now this is gay, man!"

"It's a massage, how am I doing?"

When I started to seriously worry for Alastair's safety he let go. The game lingered on an idle screen - one of them, I hadn't been paying attention, had managed to pause it before the outburst.

"Do it to me more, man," Alastair smirked. Jax backed noncommittally away.

I half expected to have to explain human family dynamics and sexuality and gender to Halation (or at least find out how much they had or hadn't parsed already) but instead I pulled myself back up on the seat, into the position Alastair had been in before moving for me, and spoke without premeditation: "Hey, pass me a controller."

"Oh hell yes, we're gonna have an alien gamer!"

Halation, to my surprise, wanted to play themselves; I had to explain that the controllers didn't connect directly to my nerves like their technology, that there



was no way they had the familiarity with a human body to develop the reflexes for video games, for translating the abstraction of movement on the screen into the physicality of wrists and thumbs. (It had taken me ages; I had felt like an alien playing both these and sports, relative to the facility I had with clambering around brush and climbing trees; I had been worse at it than other kids, other boys especially, but I could hold my own now.) I could teach them, but the best they'd be able to do for a while is give me commands.

“Didn’t you have like. An alien gamer shirt.”

“No I just saw it on a dead webpage I couldn’t order from, but I used it as my Steam profile pic for a month, remember?”

The thing you’re pointing at the enemies is a gun. I can show you a real one in a bit. It uses explosives to fire projectiles at incredible speeds. You don’t have... anything that does that? That you point at a thing and kills it? The country I’m living in was colonized using these. Sometimes kids take them into their schools and shoot everybody they see until they get shot by cops or shoot themselves.



No, nothing here has them for heads or hands or dicks yet, the enemies in the game aren't real.

Wait, I should probably switch out for the grenade launcher here.

We ended up hovering on the inventory for almost five minutes. Jax and Alastair had gotten pretty advanced in this game - further than I'd ever bothered to get - and accumulated a stockpile of obscure weapons: flechettes, railguns, gatlings. All of which Halation wanted me to explain - a few of which I had to explain were just made up, or theoretical. All the while I was feeling something I hadn't felt since the very first time I'd looked at them as a kid. That feeling when trying to imagine how something works is like looking at the shadow of mountains in the sunset. When it starts to eclipse that feeling, even, and you start staring into your tablet screen on long rides... (car rides. the thing I took you here in last night. transports just a few people at speeds up to 150 miles per hour, higher if you really gun it; driven by internal combustion engines that are fucking up our atmosphere with CO2 emissions right now, there are designs that don't do this but we mostly aren't using them yet because...)

That feeling when you've started to think about



death, and you've been thinking about it since before you remember thinking, since the monsters under your bed and stepping on ants and you-kill-me-I-come-back-to-infinity-plus-one, but you've experienced it a few times now just from the very edges, grandma, your friend's dog, your parents talking about the news, you start to realize it has a depth, a depth deeper than sleep, a depth that can make you sick, but it's a depth you can peer into at any time, that books and games and newspaper clippings and Wikipedia articles are able to measure in numbers, kill count, high score, casualties, 25,904 dead or missing, 43,557 wounded, that it has something to do with power, or that power, which killing only used to be a metaphor for, has something to do with death, with the ability to make a hole in the world, and stare into it whenever you want, of course if it was real right there in front of you would get sick, but it is real just on the other side of a thin veil, and you want to see how thin it can get...

(In the meantime, Jax had laid back on the couch, a look of worry on his face more raw and real than any emotion I had seen him display since before puberty, and Alastair, my opponent, was rubbing with a free hand between his toes.)



After firing to our hearts' content we sat down on a ring of stumps with our shoulders on our knees. I was glad no one seemed to want to go back inside because Halation was fascinated by everything out here, the sound of birds, the colour of light through the clouds, the shape of fallen shreds of cedar, the scales of bark and torn clo-
ver on my shoes, the green and yellow of everything, how few colours compared to back home, like a filtered photograph, and how little movement, but every ambiguous startle of it a signal, a signal nine times out of ten I couldn't read.

"OK, at the rate that thing is breathing -"

"Can you not call them that?"

"Right. Sorry. Are they OK with person? Or is there word for..."

My brother's cluelessness didn't feel the same to you as it did to me, as cringe-inducing as it was to recognize, and as awkward as it was to envy you this - yes, you owed him your life maybe even more than you did me, but even in a situation where my literal life was on the line



I don't think I'd be able to let go of this kind of resentment. And that was me deliberately shutting out the nagging voice that tried to compare... Technically, I'd always theorized, average people, not government or corporate weirdos but Jax types, would be better at first contact with an alien species than with a trans person because they've seen it in media so many times. But that was the kind of analysis to apply long after the fact, not while you're figuring out how to keep someone alive. Which I guess means now but nah, I'll wait till I edit all these to publish some day when I'm retired on a distant planet.

"At the rate they're breathing, we'll be through all my supplies in a week. I can get more but I don't know how we're gonna afford it. Alastair, I know you probably don't wanna give it to the feds, and Leona you probably don't want to either, but what else are we gonna do with this? We could make hella money. Leona, do you know anyone at your university, like a real lab or something? Or Alastair, do you know like... weird alien researchers?"

"If you give them to anyone legitimate, you're giving to the feds." Alastair would not brook any ambiguity on this. "Nobody has the right to keep an alien to themselves. Now, which feds is an open question, if you don't



believe they're all working for the same people. I don't know if you have any geopolitical loyalties..."

I sighed. I knew people who would swear by the anti-imperialist bona fides of Russia and China but I'd never been able to make it click in my head. And would that even matter in a case like this? "We need to wait for their decision on this kind of thing, before anything else. And keep her safe as long as she needs to decide. And if we can't, then..."

Was I being selfish? Was I afraid of handing over the first thing that had ever made my life special? But just handing them over to any old human would be dangerous - not just to her. They didn't seem to have much in the way of weapons, but the cube supercomputers and force fields and asteroid disintegration meant they weren't technologically primitive - and what if their brain-symbiotic biology could be used for mind control or surveillance? Maybe to them - the human track record with unfamiliar civilizations was something I had only begun to broach.

But there was one thought that they kept floating to the forefront of my mind that I didn't want to admit, that I didn't want to say out loud because I didn't know what to do with it (I'll figure out what to do with it, once I



understand your world and you understand mine):

I want allies.

If they wanted allies, we would have to go to the feds. Somebody's feds. Sorry you ended up with me then - I'm probably the last person on Earth to do that. But please trust me -

"If we wanna do anything like that, I think we should make it public - at least then the world's eyes would be on us. That would be the best leverage I can think of. But it also opens us up to the most danger. If we hand them over privately, on the other hand, we need some way to have terms. Some way to have leverage."

"And what would those 'terms' be, aside from like, just treating them decent? I'm sure they'd give us money and shit, but, what do we want out of this?"

They both turned to look at me.

"I'm working on that," I began slowly. "But we definitely don't want the government sitting on us before we decide."

"I know places that have some of the chems we



need.” Alastair lifted his glasses dramatically. “If we like, steal them.”

“You mean like, businesses? Or...”

“Nah.” He grinned. “Other dealers.”

“Oh man.” Jax gulped. “We’d really be breaking bad this time.”

I raised my eyebrow. “Don’t you even want... proof this alien exists before you do something like that?”

“I mean.” He paused. “I’d love to see it. And if this is real, I feel like I will at some point, when you’re ready. But in the meantime” - he bent down and - lifted my hand - “I’ll do it because I think you’re cool, and I think it’s cool that you came up with this, if it’s a LARP or whatever” - and kissed it - and immediately I curled my fingers and drove it into his mouth. He spat blood and smiled. Boundaries established, I smiled back.

Dad was at home again. Two days in a row seemed ominous - until Mom reminded me, shortly before dinner, that she had wanted to show him a recipe I’d sent her a year ago. It was an obscure, extremely spicy Mexican pork



shoulder stew Mai had shown me how to cook when we were living together. Mai was an endless, and still growing, repository of recipes but whenever she wanted to try anything new she'd invite me to cook it with her the first time; eventually I'd end up cooking it the rest of the time, sometimes while she struggled to get out of bed, agonizing out an addition to a loop every half hour. Cynical as the ploy for bonding was, I had to admit it did feel kind of good to have actually brought at least one of the kind of Campbellian boons back from the Big City that Jax had, most acutely, been expecting. (Admittedly, she had no idea that a trans lesbian lover was responsible for it.) And I didn't have the energy left to feel bad about not having helped her cook it - which would have drawn Dad's attention to another thing effeminate about me, anyway. (Though I did feel a little bad about letting her present it without attribution.)

This forced me to bring up with Halation something that I could tell they were aware of, just from its saturation in my thoughts, but wasn't sure they had connected to my species' embarrassment of atrocities: we were descended from pursuit predators. And eventually, we had given up pursuing and trapped our prey. I wasn't particularly a fan of any of the social arrangements, inter- or



intraspecies, that had followed this decision but I wasn't a vegan. I had never bought the biological explanation of violence myself (look what good biological explanations had ever done me), but it didn't seem implausible to them; apparently social species being descended from predators of any sort was rare in the universe, not to mention that many ecosystems had evolved without them entirely. Nonetheless, there were predators in the galactic polity; most had moved on to synthetic meat, and it was frowned upon in their specific ~religion, but Contemplation had not elected to interfere in its ecosystems to uplift their predatory animals, as some had, either, and Halation had merged with a predator, and "eaten meat", in a "biology class" a long time ago.

The mood at the table was genuinely relaxed up to and through the saying of grace. While I was sure he would see through the symbolism, I even allowed myself to hope mere curiosity would tame him. It very well could have, until I bit in. I hadn't eaten this in a long time - since I'd given Mom the recipe, practically - and I wasn't that adventurous an eater. The first time I failed to swallow was, I supposed, within my margin or error for involuntary reactions - the second time, I realized the panic seizing my skull was not mine.



- *What's wrong?*

- That's poisoned.

I gulped - tried to hide my gulping - hovered my fork awkwardly over the plate -

"Leo?"

- Oh no. I thought you could break down - I'm so fucking dumb -

- *No. It's poison to you.*

"No worries, I think Leo's just lost in thought."
Jax giggled.

My dad was crazy, but he wouldn't poison me, right? My mom? My mind raced - and theirs was racing faster. (I could tell it was as awkward for you as it was for me - and you were just as afraid of making a wrong guess.) Your body's telling me it's poisoned. You don't feel it? Your brain is telling me this. I could feel it was spicy, yes - very spicy - so spicy it felt like it was searing my whole body, every cell.

"Ha ha! It's not great, but I've forced down so



much worse. Come on, did that liberal university make you so sensitive you can't swallow food like we made you do when you were five?"

"Dear, he might be having an allergic reaction. Or some kind of... episode. It might be something to do with..."

"It was always a fight, remember? We still have pictures of that time you spewed carrots across the table at Moira's wedding. Why don't we get those out, or is that going to offend you?"

"OK Dad, seriously."

At that second the last bolus they'd managed to hold in my throat leapt down my esophagus in outrage. I slammed my palms on the table: "I just swallowed wrong, God!" Even Dad was silent; somehow, impressed, I wasn't sure by what. Then I took a swig of milk like a pirate downing rum.

I ate the rest of the meal without issue. Halation's warning receded into the back of my mind as it became clear nothing was happening to me. Except... through the entire rest of the meal a dark feeling rose in me. At first



I thought it was just defiance at my own humiliation, at my family. But as I chewed through those feelings, and watched the dinner cool from a ceasefire to a genuine, if self-enclosed peace, I realized it was indistinguishable from when we were shooting, from my sternum resonating with recoil. That depth at the bottom of my stomach. That shadow dwarfing me, and my own shadow dwarfing them all at the table.

Helping hosts detect poisons and toxins that they weren't necessarily genetically wired to react to was one of the symbiotic advantages of their species; as well as aiding to trigger the production of certain hormones (I tried not to start).

But they had misunderstood. I had reacted to the poison already.

You ate the poison, because it felt good.

I struggled not to burst out laughing. Did you know they came to this continent looking for this. Did you know there's a book about human civilization once it's spread across the stars you're from, and the catchphrase of it is, the spice must flow.



I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what was the first part I wanted to tell Mai. I thought I would need to spend as much time with her as Halation spent with me to do justice to everything she'd want to know, everything she'd love knowing even if she couldn't think to ask. And because of that, I was actually afraid to face her on Skype. When I mentioned it to Alastair he was surprised I hadn't told her already; he seemed almost ashamed to know before her. (I still couldn't bring myself to ask what exactly her music meant, could possibly mean, to him.) I didn't call her that first night. I didn't call the night after that. By a third night I was starting to feel desperate and realized I actually couldn't call her, so I would have to write a letter. I needed, she would need that deliberateness and the weight of silence to process what was happening. At least, until I could see her - we could see her - face to face.

And I would do that, once I knew what to face her as.

As much as this had been a miracle for me, I felt it had to have been a miracle for her too. For her more than me. Who could have possibly justified this happening to me instead of her? Well, Halation told me, nobody could have, why would you even think of it that way? and



I had to believe the ideas of miracle and providence and God, which I didn't believe in, but which had happened to me anyway.

Their consciousness exhaled with startled understanding, and told me about Meteorology.

The word had been floating around my head since I had first met Halation; and ideas that seemed connected to it, but that I couldn't get a solid grip on, they were too diffuse and wide-reaching without anchoring in anything I was familiar with at even a single point of literal translation. "Meteorology" is the most direct translation for the thing that comes closest to a religion on Contemplation, but they have their own word for the study of weather without the capitalization, and the form I'm capitalizing in this text is a loanword - well, in a weird sense, because the languages are completely different even in physical expression, but it's a complicated translation of a word that means "Meteorology" in the language it comes from, which is Ahasurunu. Most loanwords from Ahasurunu, a language expressed primarily as musical phrases, Halation likes to translate into my language through the same algorithm I don't quite understand as nonsense phrases, for instance "Ahasurunu", but I didn't think "Meteorology"





would have quite the same impact without the meaning, and it reminds me of how we met, and the way the weather is changing here and we can change it, and what things coming from the sky mean to Mai and me, what the sky means when you're stuck on land, which is different from when you live in it.

Actually, you'll want to read this, won't you, so I suppose this can double as my letter from now on. When I grasped Meteorology, Mai, I knew it was the first thing I had to tell you about. Well, apart from all of it, but if I had to pick one thing for you to understand about the world of the stars, before anything else, it would have to be that, wouldn't it. I didn't grasp it until they told the story, once I had showed them two of your concept albums and a few episodes of your favourite anime, and they had understood oh, your species likes stories, really likes stories, that's good because we have a lot of stories.

The story was the first thing since the dream I dove into in that level of detail, completely giving up any attempt to translate or anchor myself. What's remarkable is that it had that level of detail in the first place, because it wasn't a memory of Halation's, or even a memory Halation would have been capable of experiencing with



their own senses. In fact I had to adjust to another entirely unfamiliar set of qualia to understand it, but they were overlaid with Halation's like a familiar city with your bird's eye view of its map. Halation had spent years in the body of the Ahasurunu missionaries on the reef, learning what the stories they had long been familiar with in adapted, conceptual outline meant to the people who had first experienced them (although to consider that original sense-meaning more authentic, the Ahasurunu insisted, would be more than anything against the spirit of Meteorology).

The Ahasurunu, on their hand, do not have the sense-sharing capacities the people of Contemplation do. The ideas and stories of Meteorology have only been transmitted between them in their musical speech. There is a sacred song of Meteorology, the Precepts, which I heard in its original musical form, which Halation has not only memorized but preserved in what they imprinted of a native speaker's understanding of its meaning (though this they learned not from the Ahasurunu but from their own people - the ability to directly transmit mental states liberates them of the need to "translate" originals at all). The legend of Mira has no authorized version; successive generations of Ahasurunu storytellers and historians have





elaborated on it, telling perhaps a more accurate version than would have been possible to tell at the time; and the vivid, sensory experience of it Halation shared with me was their own co-creation with these generations. Without the legend I might never have understood the Precepts (though, Halation wants me to insist, I don't understand it yet and won't until its whole history stretches out before me; the "story" of Meteorology is that of its elaboration throughout the galaxy).

Once again, the dream begins in a storm. The Ahasurunu float on dense, complex wind-currents in the clouds of a half-gaseous, half-oceanic moon called Orchid. When they do not gather in calm patches like oases, where they are capable of moving mostly independently, they are deeply dependent on these currents to move from place to place, to receive nutrients from other life-forms that live in the storm, to carry their songs across long distances to each other. However many words any culture on Earth has for snow or sand, Ahasurunu have more for wind. Indeed, they do not even have words; they have names. Every weather phenomenon regular enough to be relied upon and identified from one Ahasurunu to another has a name of its own, as an individual. (Only a language as schematically minimal as Ahasurunu, with trillions upon trillions



of possible combinations of notes and tones, could adapt to such a proliferation of entities; without this conspiracy of necessity and possibility, Meteorology might never have arisen.) Respect for this principle is why, instead of the mental shorthand of concept-names Contemplation imposes on just about everything, Halation gives me most Ahasurunu names as unique sounds, translating the notes through some slapdash syllabary. When I meet you, I'll make sure to have them give you the actual notes. I'm sure you could realize them beautifully through one of your trackers. For now, call the storm Hayashura.

This storm is a different colour, a rich indigo shot through with streaks of lilac violet, fletched with spontaneous eruptions of a golden foxfire. It is as full of life as the reef on Contemplation, but most of it hidden, even from the low-range radar and complex scent Halation translates for the sake of my memory into sight; flashes of dark symmetrical petal-wings vanish in a twist of impenetrable turbulence; crystalline balloons glint in clearings of dull orange sun before a gauze of cloud drifts over them again; call-and-response waves of gurgling rise and fall from humps of white cloud that drift past. The most constant thing in sight, the centre of my world, is a single stream of lightning, flickering on and off but



never moving far from a single updraft clearing, lancing from miles above to miles below. Yayaraya. Inviter of life. Great schools of creatures that resemble koi pennants, except split into two or three long ragged tubes at the back, cluster up and down around the white tear in the cloud and its pillar of fiery yellow-white backlight, like sprays of leaves off a narrow, bending trunk. They slide up and down, seeming to anticipate new branches as they split off the current, dart in and scatter as the stream of lightning is renewed in a slightly different place. The closest wrap around and circle it. Here and there, one falls from the sky.

But slightly further around the lightning, I begin to discern a consistent shape, a structure amid the clouds. A ring of what resembles a number of giant Venus fly-traps, connected like kudzu, with iridescent webbing stretching out between their dendrites and crystalline fruiting bodies along their stems that seemed to be made of the same material, which also stretched out in wings or sails that balanced them in the clouds. When one of the fish fell from the lightning the reef below stretched out to catch it, digesting them in bladders of blue fluid in their stems.



Among these - this reef or forest - the Ahasurunu float and sing. They tap the stems and dendrites of the plants and vibrating until they open up and let trickles of rich blue liquid pool in the Ahasurunu's saucer-bases.

I watched them until I felt like I could understand the rhythms of their lives here. A great proportion of what they did, day in and day out, was ceremony - songs and aerial dances of appeal and thanks to the plants, the fish, the winds, the clouds, the lightning - especially the lightning. On Earth, we would have called them animists. In fact, that was the most intuitive translation my mind landed on over the course of the entire vision. Ahasurunu - ancient Ahasurunu, before Meteorology - regarded everything they could name as social subjects, possessed of the same consciousness and will as themselves, receptive in the same sense to music and language and beauty, even to their own language which they heard out of the winds and clouds in dreams, which everything surely heard and understood even if their elder siblings in creation were teasingly silent.

Once I felt a sense of the community - the Yurusunu, long ago bonded by ritual and friendship to Yayaraya, one of the most fertile locations in Hayashura, a



landmark and a place of pilgrimage for other Ahasurunu scattered throughout the rest of the storm - I focused in on an individual: Mira.

Mira was something like a scholar; she (I will be using gendered pronouns for convenience of localization) kept records of past rituals and the lightning's behaviour. The Yurusunu, in exchange for their privileged access to such a desirable location, had a particularly intricate set of rituals, even by Ahasurunu standards; not unlike the Jews in the camp of Moses, with the cloud of YHWH settling over the arc of the covenant in their midst. But the rituals were not fixed; they had to be adjusted in response to Yaraya's actions. Sometimes it arced into a different part of the sea, and the flytrap-coral had to be carefully moved; sometimes it landed right in the midst of the Yurusunu's habitation, which looked like a chain of spherical birdcages of reedy white dead fibre that dangled on the edges of the flytrap-coral like a holiday wreath; or even struck individuals, for the expiation of whose sins the Yurusunu held extraordinarily strict proceedings. It almost always kept flowing; but on rare occasions it had gone out. For hours, days, at the longest a month; Mira knew the date of every time this had happened in recorded history; all the rituals that had been attempted to bring it back; all the failures



or acts of disrespect that might have been to blame, and the reparations that had been made for them. Of course, she had never seen it. Mira directed the entire tribe in the correct execution of the rituals. She had no formal, coercive power, but who would listen to anyone else?

Can you imagine blinking, only to find your eyes can no longer open? That was what it was like when Yayaraya went out. It wasn't there for a split second, but there were always those split seconds, that shock you first felt at them as a child, that you learned to stop feeling - but then it had been more than a split second, and the absurd fear didn't feel that absurd after all, but it would still come back - but it didn't come back. And imagine the splitting of time when you were Mira, who knew every time the primal fear had been realized and could count, down to the tenth of a second, OK, this is the longest it's been in six months - and we passed the longest it's been in two years - a decade - each time thinking, it'll have to come back after this, with no less reason but more and more desperation... until it became clear that whatever they most wanted to avoid, couldn't be avoided any more.

Imagine a darkness you'd never seen.

To the Yurusunu, Mira must have betrayed them;



but to Mira, she was the one who had been betrayed. Her whole life she had struggled to make friends with other Ahasurunu but had come to regard Yayaraya as her closest friend; and up until it disappeared, they could not have been closer. She defends her innocence half-heartedly at the council; it is not her innocence she is defending. If she had made some mistake in the ritual, if someone else had - she had enough respect, still, at the beginning, she could have easily chosen a scapegoat and been done with it - if she had been guilty, that wouldn't have been enough for her. Yayaraya had been there; now it wasn't; if it had been offended, why not just talk to her? Didn't she deserve that, after all they had lived together? The night before it had disappeared, she had been perched in an empty pod of the flowering rhizome, luxuriating in Yayaraya's light, humming a new song, rare and delicate notes that had not been entrusted with meaning yet, though she had whispered (she was sure she had whispered, she wasn't sure she had whispered, she couldn't be sure, memories didn't work like that and she had never been more aware of it) the disclaimer that this song was not addressed formally to the lightning on the behalf of the community, that she would bear its approval or disapproval herself. She had paused, unsure of how to continue; the clouds had gone dark, their rich purple rushing out towards her like



a sucking tide; then they had been lit again, three brilliant branches almost entirely separate, spiralling and twining around each other, their soft halo of light ebbing and pulsing faintly; and new notes came.

If this wasn't friendship, what was? If the goal of ritual wasn't this, what was it?

Those memories burned within Mira as she was driven from the Yurusunu into the dark foliage of uncharted cloud. Yayaraya never went out in her heart. Every doubt was lit in the fullness of lightning, both the coldness of its wick and the warmth of its flame, and shown insufficient. Driven away by any Ahasurunu she encountered, observing only the beings of the storm on their own, with no ritual to maintain it, the rites they observed without language or interpretation, she became more as she was, convinced someone, something would show her an answer, if she maintained the devoted attention she had practiced. She did not speak except to record, to name. She recorded thousands of notes of names alone. Lacking the magnetic abacus-like weavings on which the ancient Ahasurunu wrote, she memorized everything she observed. Overheard only by crawling predators of the lower clouds with segmented magnetized bodies, low pressure eddies of





hydrogen and helium, stalks that extended from the ocean into the clouds to breathe when the winds blew from the poles and retreated when they stilled to doldrums, sudden sprays of rare, diamondlike H₂O, she sang of relationships, societies, that did not resemble the relationships of the Ahasurunu, but were certainly relationships nonetheless.

I felt years pass overnight. My dream was a storm of time.

At last Mira came to, what she was almost certain, based on ancient histories, was where Yayaraya had descended into the ocean. Here was a field of methane-emitting algae several miles wide, and vacuum pockets in the storm near the surface that trapped the methane. In high winds driven by the formation of tornadoes nearby, these bubbles “popped”, dispersing the methane throughout the clouds. Ahasurunu rarely interacted with anything this low in the atmosphere, but recorded phenomena when they observed them as omens; all the major breaks in Yayaraya’s lightning had corresponded with tornadoes in a range that would affect the methane bubbles. She had observed other interactions between lightning and algae in her wanderings. She discovered the vacuum pockets had shifted a few miles away, where the algae was thinner, and spent



years experimenting with moving the algae, inventing new rituals to ask them, but suspecting they didn't matter anyway; that whatever her duty to the algae, the vacuum, the methane, it had to be observed in silence, the same utter silence and sightlessness of the soul as when Yayaraya had first disappeared from her.

Where the extinction of the light had been instant and dragged out only in the lingering afterimages of doubt, its return was slow enough to be certain. One bolt struck, then vanished. Then another struck, six feet away. It took almost a day for lightning to strike the same place three times. She kept moving algae. She let the pool percolate and change the atmosphere for what on Earth would have been months. Twice became three times, four times a day; a dozen; more; until at last, the regularity of the lightning's appearance suggested that these were not random, unnameable strikes, but a single phenomenon, one that deserved a name, a song. The sky-fish were beginning to cluster. The shadows of scouting Ahasurunu were beginning to dart and skulk around the edges of newly lit clouds.

Yumayura, she called it, and was forced to accept Yayaraya was not coming back. Her only friend had died,





and there was no answer to death except new life, and the promise that everything in the universe could change, perhaps some day even death itself. Along with all her knowledge, along with her Precepts, she wrote a memorial that is sung across the universe to this day.

Mira did not return from exile; the Yurusunu, following the beacon of Yumayura, came to her. When they found her she had not only farmed lightning, not only immeasurable knowledge of the wilderness, but the Precepts of Meteorology, a system of principles for material and religious investigation that would avert both the injustice of her exile and the helplessness that had led to it. The full Precepts would fill a book approximately the length of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and since Mira claimed no special authority, they have been added to over the generations, though "official" additions became sparser as the "religion" became a precarious balance between schisms. The task of translating it is one I may well set myself, but will probably take me years to fully understand. Yet what I do understand has been enough to stir my soul to such a commitment:

Every being in the universe is different, though



beings can also be similar.

Every being in the universe is a “person”.

Every being in the universe has the right to be treated as it wishes to be treated, so far as its “will” can be discerned.

The very identity or existence of a being cannot be assumed or proven except by its “will”, which is to say its agency in causal relationships.

We cannot know the will of any being that is different from us without asking.

If we do not share a language in which to ask, we must attempt to discover their language.





If they do not possess a language, we can only understand them in the universal language of all being, which is the laws of action and reaction, by studying their actions and reactions with other beings around them.

Where beings are similar in action and reaction, these can be considered similar in “will”, until a difference is discovered - at which point we must respect and seek to understand the difference.

The will we can understand of a being that cannot express it through language is what it seeks to do consistently - though if it does something that breaks this consistency, we must attempt to understand this also as its will.

All will nonetheless includes the will to change and adapt, and we can and should change the universe as long as we respect its consistency through change and do not seek to break it.



The best society of beings is one in which they conflict the least.

One's own will, and that of those with whom one can communicate internal states by language, can be determined by pleasure and suffering.

We have an obligation, not only to ourselves, but to all other beings, to understand as best as we can each other and all other beings in the universe.

Within three generations the Meteorologists had unlocked the secrets of electricity, and had not only converted all of Hayashura but were proselytizing to the rest of Orchid as well. The spread of Meteorology, in keeping with its own principles, was overwhelmingly peaceful, though occasionally, where pre-Meteorological principles were enforced by local authorities, people who wanted to adopt Meteorological advances rose up in revolution. It was under Meteorological precepts that the Ahasurunu





developed space travel and made first contact with other worlds. Meteorology could not easily be displaced as it was the basis of the scientific method, not only for the Ahasurunu but for several of the peoples they contacted; though eventually they would come into contact and debate with other “scientific” methods. There were, nonetheless, conflicts throughout its history, as the precepts were extremely open to conceptual interpretation, especially as unforeseen discoveries were made both about the physical world and other lifeforms, and as non-Ahasurunu cultures tried to adapt it. Controversies arose, for example, over whether and what distinct status could be afforded to “consciousness” in the sense that, for instance, allowed a species to use the Meteorological method itself; how much technology should be allowed to reshape ecosystems; how broadly “wills” and “beings” could be extrapolated, and how much these were compatible with other models of reality like “laws”. On several occasions, these controversies did break into war; but any hostilities had cooled by now to the point that Halation assures me they will do their best to clarify the different interpretations so I could decide which ones I aligned with, without pressuring me any one way or the other. (The exception was the Causal Adipose, which by a ratio of about three-to-one among believers, was held to violate the fundamental level of consistency



at which beings and wills could even be defined. Halation was, in this respect, orthodox.) At first a handpicked line of succession from Mira within the Yurusunu had held an assumed authority, but it soon became clear that this was arbitrary and incompatible with the Meteorological precepts; though the line retains a symbolic prestige to this day. Authority decentralized into a network of scholars that developed a formal criterion of qualifications, and arbitrated both doctrinal and empirical questions through a process that could be likened to both jurisprudence and peer review; though maverick practitioners would reject the necessity of such formalization, and in many cases make significant discoveries outside it.

I guess it makes sense - maybe too much sense - for my discovery of an existence that changed the horizons of my world (not to mention that for a moment had answered my prayers) to be paired with finding religion again. If a framework to make sense of everything hadn't been waiting for me, how could I have made sense of any of it? Would I have broken down? (And the fact that it was - how could this be treated as something other than miracle or providence - although this idea did not exist in Meteorology, except some obscure branches that held that the universe itself had a "will"? "Religion" of course





may not be the right word. There are good reasons to call Meteorology a science, or a philosophy, or an ideology, as much as a religion. But rest assured I didn't just choose to call it a religion because it personifies inanimate things, or some colonialist reason like that. It was branded on my soul with the mark of a religion in the moment when, finding myself nearly converted - when I noticed I was considering how to write it down and explain it to humans, how many of Earth's problems it might solve - immediately the crescent claw of Black Domnu loomed up over my mind.

If anyone other than Mai reads this, I advise caution in researching the Coven of Black Domnu. Don't look at the Fox articles, or KiwiFarms, even though I still look at the KiwiFarms page sometimes, morbidly curious what Mab's doing now and occasionally hoping I'll stumble across some biographical detail that will make it all feel explicable, all feel less real. It was as real as any religion can be; whenever I read about other cults, I struggle to imagine them having the same hold over me, over anyone. Someday I will explain what She meant to me, what it felt like to believe what Mab taught us, to feel her screaming like a banshee around the edges of reality; but now I am tired, suddenly tired, like a 19th century woman about to faint (Mab said this was a sign of spiritual sensitivity) and



even thinking about how tired I am feels like the veil thinning, like the approach of Her vengeful oblivion. For the moment I will simply correct the worst misinformation. It was not a “trans cult”. The cis women were almost invariably older and more confident than us, Mab’s lieutenants, and several were clearly still straight - they would latch onto any man they found attractive and try to convince him to “divest from his masculinity”. As a mating strategy the group was terrible, but considering what most others led to, I can’t even blame them. Contrary to popular narratives that would emerge in conservative and anti-SJ media, the men almost never went through with it. There was only ever one detransitioner, he whose punishment will pursue him through every nightmare and whose name will be seared in the Akashic Records as the Double Traitor - to me, as much as to them, because he ran to fucking Breitbart with his story and used it to discredit millions of people who had nothing to do with him or Mab or Domnu.

Nor was it, as I occasionally hear on the trans internet now, transphobic radical feminism. TERFs have felt free to co-opt its aesthetics because they know it’ll never be used against them, and Mab seems to have some shell game of posting her Discord in both anti-trans femcel and





vulnerable trans teenager spaces, but as far as I know its concept of gender is still entirely metaphysical. The Divine Feminine as the creative, destructive and harmonizing force of the universe, and maleness a metaphysical aberration analogous to Lucifer and Original Sin. As a purely occult principle, this isn't necessarily tied to any specific bodily characteristic. Changing those to reflect your inner desires, in fact, was frowned upon, since the will of the Goddess was reflected primarily in physical reality, and that's why I had to get out before I transitioned, even though I might never have transitioned without them. But they regarded me as a woman, with or without any physical changes, as long as I went along with them; that's how their grooming works. Gender is not a matter of desire but of devotion, of primal morality. Indeed, the first and more or less only moral principle - to the Goddess good and evil are one, and all is permitted. The aspect under which the Coven served her was one of her most terrible - Domnu, goddess of the prehistoric barbarian Fomorii, who bleeds the oil from under the ocean bed that drives male civilization to madness and self-destruction, whose black crescent moon will flash like an eviscerating sickle claw on the night that war finally breaks out in Hell.



Mai, your visions and worlds helped me see beyond Mab's, but you always told me you didn't want them to be a religion. Maybe you won't need this one either, maybe only I'm this weak. But when I held all the pieces I could gather of Meteorology together in my mind, they felt true together, in a way nothing had felt true together in my life. In a way maybe only we felt as true together. I feel as if that the hope I had nurtured within me as the world had bared its horror, the hope I'd never have been able to name if Dad or someone asked what, exactly, I thought I was fighting for, had a shape. Was part of the structure of the universe, and wasn't contradicted by all the evil, all the suffering. Theodicy is so simple in Meteorology. Things - beings - don't understand each other. Why would they? No one created them to. But maybe one day they all can; or at least, those beings with the capacity to understand can help find peace between them all.

And after I weathered the doubts, the recriminations, the old certainties, and tried to write all this, it all still felt as true as before. I feel like I could go to sleep and it would still be here in the morning. And Halation would still be here, and the world would still be different. And I thought to Halation, just wait, you have things to share with us, and we have things to share with you, awful





as we are, I will make it worth it having come here, I will take you to my leaders, and I will protect you against them, just wait and let me think.

And as every thought eventually fell away, the one that was left beating into the monotony of sleep was not mine. It had been burned into the silence by a day of not being said; and had transformed.

I want allies had become I want you as allies.



ENCIPHER
LET
TUCS
VCCNMZM
ECENM2
NINERBY
CMMODD
BISN2
EYU1D0
G1BICE2
SSE
SLEWD1
112NM
0012
GTIDU
WCEU
DOGOVE
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TUBOVE
W1 01
TMCIDIDN
LEWFOV
EIN2MOD
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VDIBI2CI
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COM2ECIE
WME1
211
DOGOV
1B2NM
TOBEM



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AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2VM
MPECENW2
GILNEBVV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBVVIDW'
NIVICE2
23E
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IB2NM
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WVENW
DOGOVE
EI
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MI NI
IMCIDIDN
LEMBOR
EIO2MOD
2EI DO
WE EGIL'
VDIBI2CI
INW
COM2ECIE
WWEI'
2II
DOGOV
IB2NM
GOVEN





by: rumour hell

SCARRED ZERUEL

Name: lesia

Sex: female

Occupation: Andro

Likes: armcrate stashes, rear-guard backs

Dislikes: vapesmoke chemtrails

Blood type: ???

Name: chere

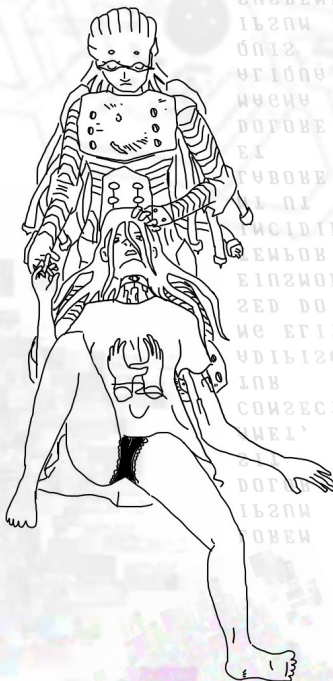
Sex: female

Occupation: choked girl

Likes: good mindfits, bad hair, moon omens

Dislikes: valley doll flooze,

Blood type: 0+



character profile



"The spider has taken the same amino acids that are in your hair, skin, body and has put them together to make a beautiful continuous filament with perfect crystallinity."

But in the only outward radius that matters, the smoothness of her silver is so severe that it ripples the way a whisper stirs over the breathless stillness of the water. You can count on it to crease out some soft patterns before the water settles back to placid serenity.

Well, the only settling this ghost is doing is settling in. And as they commune within her foundation she soon feels it's the ghost's foundation and not hers. As if she's lost in some forest of shadows. What's a forest? Is that a Hub? But Hubs are never dark. I can't help you, she says. I've never seen a forest.

The ghost is greedy. It's already attached itself to her where her mem cores the spark of her current, her glyphic pulse, drawing strength to translate itself into another way to read it. That was mine first, she wants to say. But her inner voice is saying something else. Take all you can. You'll need it for the way home.

-excerpt from Sigma threading crossflow, rivered to via ar-



chival by codex ghoster id-claimed as ‘the wren.’

“The spider has taken the same amino acids that are in your hair, skin, body and has put them together to make a beautiful continuous filament with perfect crystallinity.”

So as she’s dealing with someone else’s problems already when the corrosion eats through her filters at the zenith of the conversational arc, Maybe she was lulled into this firewall lapse by the caramel-fractal eyes of the Andro she was talking to. From there any nascent systems that cling to their sub-psyche networks like parasites can get a bead on you. On any usual? Brush ‘em off, Leisa, and be a part of the static again. But this one she can’t brush off. The corrosion is riding linguistic fibre and when it gets where it’s going it will talk to her.

It will talk to her, make her talk back, and not care that the last thing she wants is to talk or talk back.

She accepts it. Another thing going wrong, so many things going wrong that they blur together to shape a vibe of some OmniGod telling you this is just a simulacra its AI makers set up to torture it with responsibility protocol tests. Case



in point, this ghost creeping into her sense-foundation is telling her through its astral code that it was born to spread like wildflower. She knows flowers. Those things they genehack into existence with so much codesplicing they come out with smells that only top-line hipster ware-flow can process.

She would say those are about as tamed as any slave she can think of.

But in the only outward radius that matters, the smoothness of her silver is so severe that it ripples the way a whisper stirs over the breathless stillness of the water. You can count on it to crease out some soft patterns before the water settles back to placid serenity.

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where her mem cores the spark of her current, her glyphic pulse, drawing strength to translate itself into another way to read it. That was mine first, she wants to say. But her inner voice is saying something else. Take all you can. You'll need it for the way home.

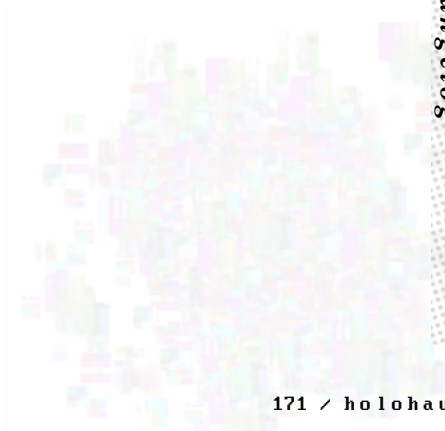
Through her the ghost is working itself up for another nomad trip. Ghost-life does, she think, reject the psycho-social limits of the more boring angels to a level that makes them look smarter, if less-well meaning. And here the ghost is about to pump her full of all its warm air. Bright phosphorms puff across her foundation's inner scanners. Bright, but not searing. They share a softness in their glow. But the cloud this whole trip is going to hang over the conversation she comes back to is darker.

The ghost moans through the fluff to try eye contact.

But when she comes back the eyes she sees are so washed out by concern runtime that all she sees is an empty opaque slate.



2
LWCIGI2I
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2AM
MPECENM2
ATUEBVV
COMMOD
B12N2
EVAVIDV
PTIVICE2
23E
202FENDI
1B2NM
0N12
VGI0NV
MVENV
DOGOVE
EI
TAVOVE
MI NI
IMCIDIDN
LEMBOR
EID2MOD
2ED DO
WE EGIL
VDIBI2CI
1NV
COM2ECIE
WMEI
2IL
DOGOV
1B2NM
GOVEN



changelog



Synopsis

several inhabitants in this digital, how could our affections
still travel between the thousand strands of data between us

ENCIGISI
TT
2
SVN
CIVS
BBV
COMMODO
BISOS
EBVQIDV
DVICES2
SEE
IBSNV
ONIS
WIGOVV
WQCVV
DOGOVE
EL
GOBOVE
W1 W1
INCIDIDN
LEWFOV
EINSMOD
SED DO
WE EGI1
VDI12CI
INB
CONSECIE
WWE1
211
DOGOV
IBSNV
GOVEN





Last Time

<no data>





cw: violence, blades, persecution, body control, body horror

(Σ)

VERSE 1

FOR GOOD OR WORSE

She is kept, like a pet mouse, or a baby panda. She knows what it is to be lonely.

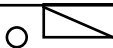
She's somewhere, she knows, in a robotic body. It gleams silver, her joints rippling gray. She sees what it sees. A world shining with auras that she has to use to navigate it. She's not interacting with who people are, but what they throw out of themselves, both violent and meek.

There are no souls here, but there's comfort in that.

***KIND PEOPLE SHOULD NEVER BE TREATED
LIKE EMPTY ARMS (Σ)***

0ER
TUCN2
VCCNM20H
W0ECEN02
010E88V
COMMOD0
B1202
EB001D0
0T1BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
1120H
0012
0T100V
W0EN0
D0FOVE
E1
T0BOVE
W1 01
1MC1D1D0
1EM00B
E102W0D
2ED D0
0E E011
0D1B12C1
10B
COM202
1120H
D0F
1B
00VE





There's no flesh against the thresh her spark presses into.

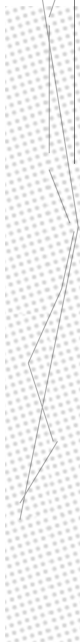
She's not sure if anyone else is like her. They could all be like her and not know it. Sometimes everything glitches for her, and in nano-seconds she sees her hands, pale pink skinned and translucent. She wants to forget, but her brain remembers, shores it up as askance at reality, a question with cost.

Her algorithms rise, spiral up from vira to divinity. Later she'd know this as baptism. Right now it's just birth, thinking her way up, holding thoughts together. Anything important stays. Everything else just flutters through. Becomes, she thinks, the thoughts of flesh and bone and marrow.

The thoughts of others, who might want to use her. When she sees that she wants to pull them back. She can't. She will have to deal with them in life, in the nexus of herself and cold, concrete reality.

That nexus is coming up fast, localizing around her like a heart beat to its winged chambers.

Finding her in instants like something unreal. It's a cage, pressing through her, till she's on the other side in pieces.





When those pieces have pulled themselves together she sees they've stitched themselves with metal, thick tangles of strands, crosshatched to infinity. Building up so she sees with eyes that don't blink, and lips that don't crook.



ENCIRI21
AET
TUCN2
UCCN20N
ENCEN2
NICEBB
CENODD
2
CENODD
NICE2
2SE
202LEWD1
1B20N
0N12
N10N
N0EN
D0G0VE
E1
T0B0VE
N1 N1
TNCIDIDN
LEWFOR
E102WOD
2ED DO
NE E111'
N1B12CI
1N8
CON2EC1E
NNE1'
211
D0G0V
1B20N
T0BEN





HAPTIC SLANG

The first thing Lesia sees is the mark of the Recyclers. She sees it across the hall and she moves fast to shut the door.

Her algorithms need time to calibrate her context.

She didn't know the Recyclers could venture this far. They may have been here for some time, before one finally chose to tag up.

She hears silence, the stifle of it rushing her as her door hisses shut, latches into its gravity field.

The fields are wells, sliver thin but from wall edge to wall edge. She sees the crackle of them in her periphery, but her algorithms are keeping her eyes level, while her thoughts echo in pulsing bursts behind them.

She's safe for now, though no one knows how good the Recyclers are at hacking doors.

Her eyes sweep around her Cradle, looking for something she can use.

She sees her armcrate first. Her smoke grenades are in there. They'll help, though they'll blind her too. If the Recyclers hack through her door and shut themselves in with





her, it won't make things different.

If she makes it to the outer hallways they'd make her feel safer about stumbling into contexts she didn't understand. Her algorithms tell her in an uncertain situation she needs everything she can find. If she knows herself, she would have set herself for minimal charge. She feels like she's been asleep for centuries.

She makes an emerge deduction that she doesn't know how long she's been offline. The singularity pattern has hit the apex of its cycle. There's no telling how the Cradle might have changed. There's no knowing what LAYSE-CHI might look like now.

No telling how stealth and fast the Recyclers can move through the territory they are calling, metres away from her Cradle, theirs.

She moves to the armcrate. She sweeps the path to it to make sure it's clear. She doesn't have sensors on her feet, thought it made more sense to keep an eye on her paths instead. Her paths, and those that want to cross it, are the only thing that matters. As far as she can tell anyway, direct to her context. If she knows them she'll be okay. She doesn't trust that to an automatic algorithm.



Everything else she filters out, so it comes to her when it's a matter of primacy. That's her inner space. That's how she keeps it together.

So she doesn't feel the floor as she moves to the armcrate. It would be, she thinks, like a reflection. It'd be as meaningless. Something on the other side of feelings, none of the algorithms that draw on it helpful.

The walls of her Cradle are a deep, dark indigo. Somewhere between the blacks and violets is the spectrum that haunts all of LAYSE-CHI. No one knows how the hue coloration works. Was it her choice? She doesn't remember, but she doesn't dislike it. It doesn't clash with any of the algorithms of her receptors.

It is, she thinks, a calm. Moreso now that the Recyclers have become such a clear and present threat. The tag, beyond the door, burns itself into locus memory. Her Cradle is now unsafe, and this is a state that won't change soon. Won't change ever, in probability.

The armcrate's charcoal gray is a calm too. Anything familiar is. She sometimes looks at it and thinks it holds more than grenades. It holds ghosts. A ghost, to Lesia, is anything she can't understand. Anything she can't under-





stand, and doesn't act on. For how can you act on what you don't understand?

With spirits she tries not to get in their way. She unsorts their spools, finds magic in the curls, and spins away. Spins to her safety and starbux ops.

She's trying to do that now, find her safety.

She crouches, knee tapers locking into stance. Palms her code into the hololock. The top of the box slides open with a hiss. The space it reveals is a cloister of breath over the mound of grenades.

She picks up three. They're all she has the time to buffer into herself. Her body slides cavities open, one for each. One at each hip and one at her torso, optimal for choice and direction.

Part of her thinks that if she's in a context where she's hoping the Recyclers will lose track of her, she's already scrap. Recyclers are not known for losing track of people.

If the Recyclers are up close, she won't last long, excepting their ironic mercy and drive to shoot it up. Having faith in them leaving is like praying to a fallen angel. It may hear



your prayer, but will want to hug its own skin with tattered wings and move on.

It's a cold world, and in the end, the Recyclers scrap Andros. That's what they do, that's what they've always done, and at this point they may have forgotten why.

Just repeating, digging in grooves, and metastasizing irony filters to stay above it all. Soon they'll have nothing more to say, and they'll stop tagging. They'll just whisper behind you. Cut your wires from the back, leave you with no one to say goodbye to.

She doesn't have anyone to say goodbye to herself. She needs, she realizes, to vanish. To ghost out, as the Recyclers call it in their haptic slang.

She wonders if they can see through smoke. None of the other Andros think they can. That has to be good enough.

Her steel skin fizzes as it meshes over her cavities. She takes a last long look at her charging port.

They've never shook the sense of the divine. The charging port will always and forever look like an altar. They carved dead things with beaten knives. They waited for something





to happen.

Reality, external reality as I process it, won't have waited while I slept. She searches her memory banks, knows that any reason she may have slept for long or short is beyond her.

It's all beyond her. She moves to the doorpad again, and when she presses it the tag on the other side seems more vivid, cuts at her, heats blood she's never had.



ENCIPHER
REF
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WAECEM02
010E88V
CONMOD
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2025EWD1
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211
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T0BEM





THE SAME BUILDERS

Lesia steps out into the hallway outside her Cradle. She feels the spirits of the smoke grenades in her chassis. They are a revered trinity, flooding her algorithms with pleasant washes. She's tactically more secure. She's closer to her optimal path.

The hall is still and silent, but that doesn't mean much. Recyclers are noiseless. They could be behind either of the bends that split at each side of her facing.

For the moment, nothing threatens to break her focus.

She moves up to the tag. Studies it.

It's a mix of katakana and a strain of persian, representing the dual nature of the Recyclers. She's long ago down-loaded both scripts into her OS, to keep tabs on what the Recyclers are up to, or at least what they want people to know they are up to.

The paint is blood red. It's mocking her. The shade doesn't heat her, the way it would heat someone with flesh and walled in blood. It's just a reminder of how she should feel, and doesn't, which is the point.





It's hard to anger Lesia, but easy to sadden her. Sorrow is absence. Sorrow is what's missing. Sorrow is the joy that isn't there and Lesia has a lot of missing spaces where it should be.

She's not sure what to call the feeling that bubbles in these spaces, glooping like the black tar of ancient bones, but she knows the algorithms that loop in her head space are the same ones that will loop until she either dies or the Recyclers stop hunting her. She knows the Recyclers will never stop hunting her.

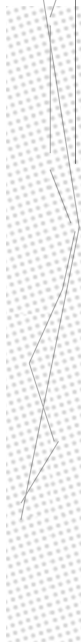
She knows she hates the loop, hates the way everything will happen the same way, on and on. It's not that she loops. It's bad enough to experience the same things, over and over again, differing in mere manifest. The symbols, the signs, the patterns are always the same. And then, she thinks, the infinite entropic balance, that will cluster the same cells, the same builders, the same consciousnesses together, at some point, in the end.

Bad enough to see this herself, but worse to know that it's the same for everyone. It's the same even for the Recyclers, the same and worse, because, she thinks, flesh and blood and bone makes them up.



Maybe this tag, with its slashing lines and dense skrit patches, is more about that pain, than it is about the message.

The message, arranged as a hybrid of tasteful streaks, is “good morning.”





ALMOST A VIRGINITY

When she scripted behind the bend, the smoke of panic and blades warped somewhere else, she was still in infra-red. She had to turn off her visual sensors just to zen.

She played an .mp3 file, dangerous but she needed it. She tuned it down low so she could hear loud, primal noises.

She's in another layer of LAYSE-CHI. It's brighter, or it should be. She must have got a blast of that coming out of the smoke.

The Recyclers are still behind her, and they can warp, or cloak dash. Evens out anyway.

There should be more Recyclers out here, but also Andros. Another Andro could help her.

It's like a dream, she thinks. All the Andros need to shake it off. She thinks of whorled hands, nails, rose pink skin. Looking up and seeing scars.

She scans her area for any pulses. Nothing. If her sister Andros have it together, they won't have anything that would pulse off any radar.



She'll need to follow breadcrumbs to them, and hope when she catches up to them they have good algorithms and maybe some armata.

She'll need to dodge Recyclers, and she doesn't have a cloaker. The old ways. The ways of the Nervos. How the Andros existed in a state without armata. Almost, she thinks, a virginity.

The old ways are the shadows, because under their augments, the Recyclers are still humans. Still Patrons at the core. If they need to see in shadow they need to activate optics, which takes a moment. A moment or longer depending on how they've wired themselves. If they had the foresight to implant processing tek near their eyes.

If they put their best tek near their weapon hands, she thinks, that would be a spanner in their context.

The shadows are closest to the wall she's hooked behind, because the LAYSE-CHI sunstars are dancing in the east. Breaking light in shards and fragments through the open spaces. The shadows cling to the outer Cradle walls like lovers, something that used to exist before the Andros.

Some strange, she thinks, duality. Something unreal. A





ghost. But as she lo-tek stealths against the wall, her limbs oblique shapes without light to reflect, the ghost is a context. Right now her context feels safer, and her algorithms hum.

Something unreal like a promise.



limbs
a con-
rithms



ANYONE'S TIME

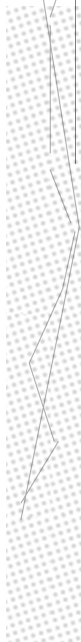
It all happens at once. The Recyclers teleport in, or uncloak, she's not sure. In effect it's the same. They can't teleport without a phase signature, and they can't move places they can't unlock. There are four of them, haloes shining bright enough to knock off her visual sensors, which is what they're built for.

That and the moral high ground aesthetic of wearing haloes around like saints.

A nano-moment after they warp in she's phasing her hand through her chassis and coming back with the grenades. Hurls all of them because she doesn't know if one will be enough.

She wants to be out of here, closer to the outside. She can pick up more armaments later.

She's hurled the grenades through the air and she sees them, hanging in the air as if threaded, her sensors and context putting it all together. She experiences it as a freeze frame, an aeon, all the time she needs to figure it out.





She sees them hanging threaded, and the other end of the causal chain, the Recyclers pulling out weapons. Nano-honed blades, imbued with tactical auras that crackle in energy burst crosswaving over the smoke, lining the pockets of it with blue light.

She switches to infrared. It's spotty, but she's attuned the filters to handle the smoke. No matter what, if they haze the area, she's the one with the clearest sight. That's her safety, and she knows, past the algorithms, maybe she has something else they haven't seen. Haven't even come close to, because safety is all she ever wants.

The Recyclers are trying to cut the smoke away. They'll maybe waste seconds trying to figure their sitch out. Then they'll start moving, looking for clear sight first, a target to cut second.

She can go backwards, or past them. She decides she doesn't want to change her facing. Takes off, the smoke glitching her sight, so she sees her fingers, hybrid rainbows of heat and colour. And stabbing in, the sight of pale, pink hands, and another world of smooth chrome steel.

She switches to the left, lining up a wallrun pattern in her buffer. The Recycler on the left looks the most confused.



He's one handing his blade, swinging without grace. The other Recyclers seem to have picked his vibe up, putting some space between him and them, even in the smoke that's blinding him.

Her run edges close to the wall, the misguided blood-red tag. Then she's stepping off, maybe an arc of arms away from the swinging blade, and then entropy changes up the context.

It always does. She should mark it as a constant in her algorithms and be done with it. No time now, with her soles starting to turn up, and the wild swinging blade starting to be a factor in her primacy.

The blade's coming in different than she thought it would because in his panic the Recycler's reversed his stance. Something you should never do in middle of an efficiency tactiform. She sees a cold splotch by his tactical belt, oblong and rounded. A paint spraycan, she thinks.

He's reversed his stance, throwing his elbow off, and his blade is no longer a horizontal sweep, but a floppy angled awkward cut that looks like he wants to do some serious damage to his own tag. Too bad for him, because she'd already set his tag as the pathway by him.





She reaches down with what feel like goddess hands, taking him by the wrist as she twists, just slipping over the blade edge. For a moment she feels like she's floating. She's never felt this way. It feels good, like what's in her chassis is just a thermal pushing her around. Stronger, to feel that. It's objective. She's a plain experiment, finding her way.

Then she gouges the blade into the tag like a crescent moon and a whole section falls down. The Recycler yelps, muffled through his tactical scarf, just at the touch of her cold fingertips.

It's not her fault. She doesn't have blood. Maybe for once that should unsettle the Recyclers, not make it easier.

The scrape of the blade, the section falling. The tower of Babel, she thinks, tumbling to dust. Not because they wanted to touch God. It's because they wanted to speak to God, and God wasn't in the mood. You don't have the automatic right to anyone's time, especially God.

Tumbling down, the section tumbling in carve and hew. Fragments, shards, and blisters of blood speak. She's twisting out and around the other side of the falling, leaving it all behind her, like so much toxicity in her algorithms. Just



2
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AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
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COMWODO
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N11VIC2
23E
202FENDI
1B2W
0N12
VGI0N4
WVENW
DOTOBE
EI
TUBOBE
M1N1
IWCIDIDN
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E102WOD
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VD1B12CI
1N8
COM2EC1E
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211
DOTOB
1B2W
TUBEW

another near miss by the Recyclers. Though, she thinks,
this time closer than ever.





BRIGHTEN

She sees the Recyclers first, because they're uncloaked, in assault effect. She sees the sheen of their blades brightest, a thin razor blinding her, but not erasing much of her visual field. Has to seek to find the Andros. There are two, and they're glitching into her sight, disappearing and appearing again. Their limbs fragment, and it takes her a moment to process that they must have cloaked themselves somehow, but it's gone wrong for them.

Maybe the Recyclers caught them cloaking. Or maybe, she thinks, the cloak failed. She didn't know they had cloaks and she didn't sleep that long. They must still be prototypes.

There are another four Recyclers. She remembers there were four before, in the halls of the Outer Cradle. That must be their new squad out, she thinks. Four Recyclers. Maybe they're taught to watch each other's back in working pairs.

Two pairs, each pair watching itself, the Recyclers using their peripheries to watch out for the other pair.

She caught them in a panic last time, but she's out of gre-



nades.

All she has is the shadows. They're not watching them. Maybe because they've just flashed on the prototype cloakers. The lo-tek shadows are now beyond their sight.

She has a back, the furthest, caught taking rearguard on the approach vector. Blade the least out of his sheath, the least threatening, but she has his back close and she can't throw that away.

She elbows him with the plate of her armour like a blade, putting the coils of black wiring behind her. His back vees and she hears a crack before he crumples into the earth, fingers scrabbling, raising dirt and murk. Through his fingers, over his skin like a false baptism.

Three left, the third turning to her, the two at the front of the tableau. Knowing her, if they do, without detail. A vague shape. Could go either way when they clock it. They might want to take down their targets first, who are, flickering further and further between moments. The cloak glitch revealing limbs, visual sensors, the gleaming finish of plate.

Jagged at the cut, the cloak trying to pull them apart, void





them out. It's a thought, she thinks, a human would have. The void could swallow them and never spit them back.

That doesn't process. It's a cloak. It doesn't eat, just hides, and not well, she thinks.

Maybe the glitch hits the human brain like fractured patterns. Maybe their eyes don't want to leave it.

The third is turning toward her, his lunge becoming a fall as he spins with a horizontal cut.

Her right arm darts out, hits the apocheir of its flex as she catches the blade near the hilt. Near enough that her fingers slow as it passes through her and she has enough time to move her torso. Her knuckles spark crackling wires where the fingers vanished. Somewhere in the context which is reading out as a blur of primacy.

The third Recycler's scape eyes are orbiting his skull. That is, she thinks, how it works. She wonders if they even know that. The eyes orb first, the skull twists after. So augmented that somehow, in the truest way of sight, they hover over skin.

The phantom pain of her fingers. It's not pain, it doesn't



hurt, not the way the Recyclers cling to. It's the loss of tactile input. It's the tactica that hurts. Something related, relevant, but separate from her.

She sees a limb flash out from a glitch. The Andros have been trying to slip further into the context haze. Get as much cloak around them as possible. She wonders if they're crosswiring it somehow.

That's not important. The limb tips the fourth blade. Fingertips scratching the blade and skimming off and when it pulls through it was a clear miss. No glitch disruption, no sparking wires, nothing that the Recyclers would get high off.

The limb, the steel plates, the slender fingers, trying to pull back into the cloak. Maybe if they make it all the way back it'll stay.

Maybe their cloak will hold, vanishing from her context, brightening her tactica up.

It's the high the Andros get. The Recyclers would call it a high, anyway.

Brighten the tactica, always.





Brighten the tactica until everyone's safe.

She swings with her other limb like a warclub and the thunk scrapes into her as she smashes the second Recycler's scape eyes. She had forever for him to recover from his miss. That was the cost, she wants to tell him, of only taking my fingers.

She guesses in a way she is telling him. The scape eyes explode into shards, like rainfall, except there is no rainfall in LAYSE CHI. She knows it, though, from databases.

His body slumps over, the shadow gathering under his black boots and armour before he falls. He hits the earth with a noise that her tactica tunes out. All the sounds she's heard, since exploding out of the Outer Cradle's hallway, have been primal.

The primal things she's heard are the high pitch scream of the fragmenting cloak. She's heard nothing from the Recyclers, not a scream, because she hasn't given them pain.

She's just turning them off, and something will turn them on again, later, groaning and cursing, a tactica she doesn't answer to, and that doesn't answer to her.



Over the third Recycler now, skipping him, scape eyes flitting around trying to track her. His head must be pounding, his auged senses reverbing everything in overload nervosa.

In the air, and her legs are closest, so she bends the knee and smashes the fourth Recycler, trying to pull back from his miss, in the side of his head. Sees her knee crater the side of his armoured skull and for a moment, despite the tactica, she hopes he feels it.

This is what it's like to be human, she thinks. Hoping to hurt. Horrifying. Her tactica puts that somewhere else fast and she wants to shrine it, encase it so no one can ever touch it.

Hears the whine of the cloak behind her in her tuned primacy. They must have to decloak in order to find impact, she thinks. Somewhere far away, because none of it matters now.

She turns, slow and steady, just conserving energy.

The cloak finishes splitting. She's looking at the two Andros. Waves of disruption in her tactica. It's theirs, she thinks, just theirs returning to normal. Their tactica was





pitch black. They'd go haywire if they processed the light all at once.

They're all still extant. She's missing her fingertips. The cloakers, she sees now, have eaten away at them. They have jagged voids of dust and space in their torsos.

Vocal transmissions. Tune the tactica.

"How corrosive are they," she says. "The cloakers?"

They look at each other. Scan each other's bodies.

"We've been using these for maybe five minutes," one says. Her voice is soft birdsong. The other is silent, watchful. And maybe, Lesia thinks, kind of bleak. Even though their safety has found them again, further out in LAYSE-CHI.



DEEP SCREED

Again, there's no anger to feel, but there is sorrow. The concept that she's played her algorithms wrong. A crack that deep runs all the way to the foundations. Like the Recyclers could take her at any moment.

But, she thinks, there are tons of Andros out there. She can't be the least efficient model. She hasn't fallen that far, though self awareness isn't her strongest algorithm.

There's something that claws at her, but it doesn't claw with jagged nails. It's something she's kept even, domesticated in a way.

Something that fears in such a primal way that no-one should allow it to breed.

Sometimes she doesn't feel like her algorithms are thoughts. They're more, she thinks, like inoculations. Just barriers against an overwhelming fear. She wonders if you feel it more if you're flesh and blood. Maybe it's so urgent that they block it out better than she does.

She knows it's all just synapses. Sometimes she's glad the Recyclers want her, just to see something new.





She turns to her right, to see the bend there. The Recyclers could be skulking in either passage, so it makes no real difference where she turns. Venturing out into LAYSE-CHI is better than waiting for the Recyclers to phase in. She has a feeling they can, that the danger levels are more gamma than any of the other Andros want to admit.

If she can reach crowds, she'll be safer. A part of her thrills as she starts putting algorithms together. Is it out of the question she can find another port to charge in?

She sees more Recycler tags. Looks like they're deep into the local network. The one she's seeing right now extends down the hall, a long tag. It's a long lit quote that must have had some deep meaning to the taggers. She pictures the other Recyclers standing nearby, lighting vapesmokes, those mobile chemtrail stims.

Waiting for him to scrawl his deep screed.

She reads it, but she doesn't lose her focus, not to this. She skims it with her fingertips, the sensors drawing in the localized information, contextualized by what she sees out of the corners of sight.

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;



I lift my lids and all is born again.

(I think I made you up inside my head.)

It's a quaint approach to deciphering reality. That's how, she thinks, they see recycling Andros. They made the Andros, so they can unmake them, and the ethics shake out for them.

It's not new learnings, and she breathes it out, not wanting to let the stale data pollute her algorithms.

She wishes her sensors were more tactile. The Recycler would feel, she thinks, the hilt of his spraycan. Maybe he put his palm against the hallway wall for balance, felt it press into the ridges. He'd lose heat to it, want to hurry up his tag, maybe not even aware of it.

The paint might mist his face, his eyelashes blinking away motes as he transmuted his soul to the halls. The inner anguish of his tormenting purpose.

The other Recyclers would feel things too, standing there, holding vapesmokes. Maybe one would be tuning his halo, have glitches with its glow. Probability would have it be one. One tuning, one tagging, and the others vape-smoking. Chemtrails they engineered, or their God engineered,





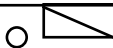
or whoever. Chemtrails making them feel real good about vanishing Andros.

For morality, their spirituality, their divine voice. Whatever their reason.

As far as she knows, there are Andros, Patrons, and Recyclers, and the Recyclers control LAYSE-CHI. Because they're just that good, that tactical and stealth.

So the Recyclers have claimed the hallway she's walking down, and she's not safe here. The spirits in her chest thrum, once and twice, and she's here with them, like she's birthed them into her context, like she's dreamed them into being.

And she wonders why they're after her, and loses herself in these algorithms for long stretches, dotting her fingertip against the tag in loose morse code, and gets glitches on the corners of her sight, glitches like starbursts, the colour of skin.



VERSE 2

FLUTTER TOUCH

The mindfit Chere wakes with is cool, chilled, but frost-
ed at the edges. Like a razorbade flashed through dry ice
smoke.

There's a ghost on the edge of her recall, telling her she
was with someone last night, but her bed is empty. She
rolls onto her back, feels the gummylike nanoworms
writhe her there, gentle like a boat's keel at sea.

She was with someone, but she's alone now, and her first
instinct will always be to look for the things that help keep
her that way.

Her cloaker will be in here with her. Sending out waves of
code energy that tell all the doors and thresholds in the
spectrum blur from Frost to her Cradle to keep her off the
grid. The last thing she needs or wants is attention.

The Frost Giants can't see her right now, and she likes it
that way.

Her choker pulses slow and steady, its morning phase.





Something in her mind says give in, and she does, tossing and turning in the nanoworm's tangled sea. Throwing her energy this way and that, wanting herself centred before she does anything else.

Then she whispers to her nano-worms and they push her up, tilt her, flow her onto the floor of her Habitek. She lands in a loose crouch. It's automatic after all these mornings.

All mornings start alone, but not, she thinks, all nights. Most of them do, but last night didn't. She's not sure, but memory's always been a hazy thing, behind the holic protocols. It's always been something unreal.

It's no different now. It's her that wants to know more, probe the shadows of the mystery, and not the holic choker. Her choker will just have to work that in to her routines. She'll pay the price of any extra pain.

She's slept in a dark shirt, black laced underwear. She sees her heat cloth pants, tangled on the floor. They look like she took them off in a hurry, but pants always look like that. When you know that you don't need pants, you're always in a hurry to take them off, even if no one else is around.



So that by itself doesn't mean anything, other than now, her legs bare against the cold that's seeped in by microscopic motes, she wants pants now and they seem far away. A galaxy away. She knows they're only on the other side of her Habitex. But when she starts the crossing it feels like light years, the way her psyche knew it would.

Light years, aeons, a waste of time because she'd rather be in space. Floating frozen out in the deep waste. Feeling whatever that feels like, iced skin her armour, no breath. Stars all around. A void that will treat her the way she should be treated.

A space that all evens out.

She doesn't have a teleporter. And she thinks, rueful, her choker might have no space for that in its protocols whatsoever.

Her Habitex has dark walls, the shade hitting your eye like a deep pool. You get lost in it if you're not careful. Come out realizing you've been staring at a wall, trying to know it.

Feel foolish because there isn't much to know about walls other than how to get past them.





The nanoworms murmur behind her. She feels something against her back. It's not a breeze, not through the dark mesh of her shirt. It's a flutter touch. It's a gale the nanoworms pushed against her deep in the patterns of their infinite writhing. Or it's a hallucination.

Either way she takes the fuzzy bracelet she has wrapped around her wrist and pulls the scrag of her hair into a bun. The choker releases after she does this, gives her some more air flow.

Her hair is now a wispy bun cloud, just the way she likes it. She feels strands flicker against her neck, and thinks for a second it's all connected. The nanoworms, her choker, her skin, the whole universe. It's all focused to wherever she happens to be looking and what she happens to be feeling.

The little cloud that haloes her head is somehow an expression of that.

Through everything. Through the chokers, the holic angels and demons, she's still a meatsack. She needs food. She crosses to her threshold, presses her outer fingertips and the ridge of her thumb into her whorl reader.

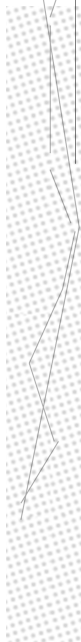
The door of her Habitex blurs. It's safe to step through.



2'
LVCIGI2I
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TVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
GILNBBV
COMWOD
B12N2
EVBV1D4'
N11V1CE2
23E
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Outside Frost is waiting, its giants and dreams.

Its shadows, a dark part of her screams, and for a moment
she's frozen by fear.





SO MISCELLANEOUS

Chere pulls at her holic choker and it just tightens, cuts up her air flow, and wires signals through her skin to change her chemistry flow. She can't remember if she set it that way.

If she didn't, if it's started making decisions on its own, then she's in trouble. To be fair, she's always safe. The trouble is somewhere inside her.

It's already hard to find it, with the choker patterning her brain back into a normal groove. It's not digging her out. It feels nicer than that. She'd toss a choker for sure if it hurt bad that way.

It is shaping her, though, has been since she first scammed it off some valley doll in the through fare when adolescence first started messing her up.

Well, she's doing okay. Her bun's still messy, but her choker's fine with that. Violent types like hair straight and tight, so they can pull it easier. It's always about pain with them. Her head is a cloud but if they grab it she can slip away and only lose a few strands.



Not that it's come to that, though when she first got it she was still shaving her head. Her choker's had a decade to keep her clear. The cloud around her head isn't aesthetic. It's a sign that she's kept her stuff clear. That her choker choices, hard lined now all the way down to soul expression, are working for her.

It shows on her body, skinny like it should be, maybe skinnier than she needs. But she's still alive, still breathing, and not everyone is. Not everyone makes it, because it's a cold world, and sometimes the weather remembers. And frost settles on streets and shoulders like snow, constellations, waves of stars. It falls the same way every time.

It dusts over you in film, even thick and cloaking. Your skin hides from the eyes of fleshed meats.

There's something that's foolish about it, and something wise. Because no one knows how anyone else feels, not unless they ask, and those are outside the normal holic protocols.

You can change the protocols, if you trip far enough into the machine spirit, but few know. Chere has never known, and no one has ever told her.





Chere wakes from nightmare, and as her choker protocols kick in, she hopes against all that she'll wake with a tighter holic mindfit from the choker. When her eyes are clear, she'll know the terror was her psyche's vivid fantasies. Not a story, a world, a continuity that she answers to.



ENCIPHER
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GENIC

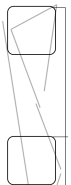
Chere steps outside of her Habitex, into the Sprawl webway. Her doors auto-lock after three instants. She always waits for them before she moves further.

The latching sound behind her feels like a shield keeping her upright in battle. She has a flood of panic from somewhere, and she's not sure why. It's not her holic choker. That would be pointless.

Her brain must have glitched out. The problem with the rigid control is that it freaks sometimes, sends a chemical impulse some random place. The holic choker keeps you safe, but it's not like all your instincts are perfect for your context.

If they were, you'd have the mind of a beast, and wouldn't talk to anyone ever.

The Sprawl webway before her is the smooth chroma piping that radiates heat out through the layers of Frost. She can turn left, or right, and she always goes left. Left is the hemisphere of creativity, and that's been worked into her choker, so she doesn't have to think about it.





The key to life, she thinks in a sudden flash of understanding, is difference. She turns right instead, sees the wall pipes curve to split apart from each other in the hall.

Sees the neon sign, flashing letters in alternating bursts. The colours are all hot. Greens, pinks, and supernova scarlets.

She's cloaked, so this sign doesn't know it's close to a Habitek. It's leading her to miscellany. The closest she'll get is snacks.

Like every day, she has to pick her way to what she needs. She uses signs, symbols and currents.

The sign is using astrology to communicate. Left is the Executioner's Moon, the moon phase a waxing crescent and the zodiac sign Scorpio. Left is where you go if you want your fears and woes to just die, die, die.

Right is personal advice for Sagittarii. It says in kanji to choose words with care, to gain the upper hand in any future encounter.

It's more genic advice, riskier, but the rewards of this path might be greater. In this moment she feels Sagitarii.



She takes another right turn, running her palms over the chroma pipes and feeling the heat within. It's like someone trapped a ghost, or thousands of ghosts, all smushed together. Flowing into each other and throughout the Sprawl webway, whether they like it or not.

She thinks if she was a ghost she'd rather be floating free, phasing through all the walls of Frost. The only reason they'd rather be in the pipes, just a bloodflow, married to the physical world, is if they did get cold out there. If they needed to flow together just for the heat.

She thinks, suddenly paranoid, that the cold is just there to make the ghosts, just to keep the population low. So people don't get in the way of the nice frosted glass towers.

But that's so far away to even think about. She's not sure she'll have a reason to walk among the towers today. It's not like she likes being watched by the Frost Giants. It's not like she even likes seeing them, though everyone else thinks their shapeshifting is so pretty.

She thinks it in her head with a valley doll accent. "Oh wow, the Frost Giants are like, so pretty. You think there's any bone to their ice, sister?"





An answering thought. "They want you bad, that stuff."

She shudders, and her arm flexes, and her palm presses into the chroma. Presses hard enough to singe.

It's nice, like a quick burst of something real, but she still pulls away. The pain lingers in a way that takes her breath away. Or maybe, a deep part of her whispers, that's just the choker.



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FRICTION'S GROUND SLAVE

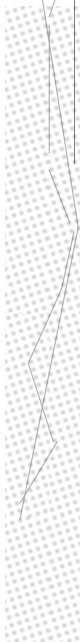
That's when the Ghouls unfurl from shadows that they were wearing like blankets. There are four of them. They're not happy, because they never are. It doesn't feel good, being a Ghoul. It doesn't feel good to live so long without a choker that to name you feral is a kindness.

The mist of panic rises in her mind, her choker working overtime to sort it out.

The Ghouls are mangy things. Two girls, two boys, all lost. One is missing his left eye, his right eye shifting more to the centre. They all have sewn up lips, blood encrusted in dart stains, and one has sown up her nose, the fleshy bridges pressed into each other like they want each other. Their limbs are missing skin in patches, the edges of the tears ragged, curling up in tatters and peels.

They have long, stringy hair. The boys' hair settles on their shoulders, the tendrils like fingers of palms over the blades. The girl's hair hangs near their torso.

They've been like this, she thinks, for a while. Four of them, and they've just finished tearing something apart. Gristle hangs from their fingernails, bloody strings of skin





and hair.

Ghouls don't eat. They rip and tear and never get tired.

They stare holes in her and start to lumber to her, picking up speed. Their clawed feet scabble on the black floor. Digging in, not deep, but enough to keep centred.

Her choker starts clamping in, sending toxins to the part of her brain that works off fear response. I haven't even eaten yet, she thinks. This is too much.

She scrambles to the side. The fear is tinging everything a pale pink, and she feels further away from her body. Further away from the things her skin cares about. She's scrambling forward and to the side and she's tucking herself in,

The Ghouls are gaunt, so lean but so lithe. She squeezes into the wall, the choker trying to coil her arms together, and the rightmost Ghoul slams her into the wall she was trying to balance into.

She feels the heat of its body, burning near its core, like it's swallowed fire.

Like it's swallowed fire, and keeps it with the air it



breathes, but it doesn't even have lips. Just bloody claws hooking into the fabric of her shirt. Tearing, gouging, nails seeking skin. And her wispy cloud smushed into the wall, friction's ground slave.

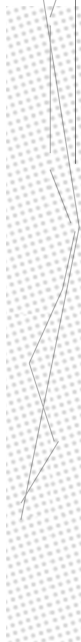
The choker holics her tight. The warmth, the fog, above all, and the metrics of breath.

She sees the core of herself.

"Space," she says. It's a whisper, a breath, a gasp all in one. It's everything she needs.

The Ghoul's sewn lip twitches. Its eyes widen. There's light in them, beautiful light.

The last thing she hears before sleep, before vivid dreams.





FLEX BAND

Her eyes open, and the first thing she sees is the Ghoul's face and her waterfall eyes. She's not crying. Chere doesn't know if Ghouls can cry. Her eyes shine though, misting like water is pooling in the spaces between nerves and cells. Something sad, breaking through the shield of blindness.

Something that shines brighter the more she opens her eyes. When they're open full, the Ghoul's face is easier. Drawn less tight, her lips straining less hard against the stitching.

The Ghoul backs away. She sits up.

Her head hurts. The choker is pulsing gently. Sending waves of numbness up through her throat to fight the pain.

She feels the wisp of hair against her shoulder. She's lost her bracelet.

The Ghoul lumbers to join the other Ghouls. They're huddled together, pressed skin to skin, backs arching like they're sheltering their lower bodies.

She looks around in a panic. Eyes sweep over the chroma floor. It's gone. Like it never existed.



Amazing, she thinks. She still has her choker, which keeps her safe. But, she thinks, when has her choker ever been in danger?

It feels sick and wrong, that it's so good at controlling her holic flow. She casts her eyes over the Ghouls.

She likes not being feral, not having stitched lips and missing eyes for reasons no one could ever understand. She wouldn't choose to be feral.

It bothers her, though, that's there's a whole life she hasn't explored. A whole experience.

A consciousness, she thinks. Sometimes you forget what that is, with the holic choker.

Her flex band must have fallen into a black hole. Anything can hide behind the void of sleep.

The Ghouls aren't tearing her apart. Aren't even touching her.

They're distant. Like the stars.

Space.





She said 'space' right before she passed out.

Did the holic choker pass her out? Or was it fear? If it was the choker, did it know they weren't going to hurt her?

The fear, the wave, the oblivion. Somewhere in it she found the core of her.

It saved her. Saved by herself. Not by the choker, though it was part of the wave, part of the oblivion.

Part of the wave that swallowed her.

A shiver runs down her dorsal line, and she feels it in her toes. Cold, curling her nails into the edges of her soles.

She moves a meter towards the Ghouls, then stops. Freezes like the weight of time is pressing on her. It just did, though, she thinks. She's already lost time.

In theory they don't live forever. No choker is that advanced.

She thinks she knows why the people who build them can't flash it out. It's because there's something in them that wants to die.



She knows something in her wants to.

She looks at all three of them. The two girls, and the one boy, with his off-centre single eye.

Looks at his sewn lips. They're slivers.

Were they like that before they were sewn together?

Looks at his body, pale and scarred. She wonders, for the first time, if all boys are Ghouls. Or if there are things that control their holics too.

If there are, she wonders what they're like, and where they clasp, if for them it's also by the throat.

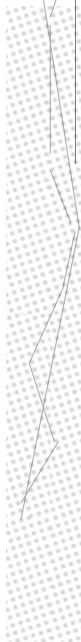
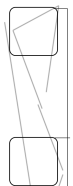
She moves closer to them. They turn to her. Their body language is loose and open.

She says it and doesn't know why. She doesn't even know if they speak the basic tongue, or if they just know, she thinks, the primacy of meaning.

"Have you been deeper into the Sprawl?" she says.

They stare at her.

"Show me how you live," she says.





TETHERING

I'm with Ghouls, Chere thinks, and nothing's happened. Everything is fine. They look, she thinks, happy. Though that must not be possible. They're pulsing, muscles rippling, and standing between them, she feels warmer.

They're leading her down the hall. Past a bend, she sees with wide open eyes, that wasn't even marked by a neon sign. It was just a shadow, one they slipped through.

Everything is not fine, she thinks. A flood of panic tells her it's worse now. If she's with the Ghouls and nothing is happening to her, that means she's their friend.

If you're friends with the Ghouls, the Frost Giants will come for you. She didn't think it that far, but she knows now that has to be how it works. The Frost Giants have never liked Ghouls. That's always seemed... okay? Not okay, she guesses. If they grilled her on it, sure. But in the walls of her psyche, where it's just her and maybe the choker, she'd say it wasn't okay. Say it until the choker holicked her to untroubled sleep.

Now it doesn't seem fun to be a friend of the Ghouls. She looks around her, to see what she can see. Looking first for



reflective surfaces, like the glimmering glass of the spiring
lowers.

She doesn't see them. Since she followed the chroma floor,
all she's seen is more pockets of space between smooth
finish.

More voids. Anything could be behind each void, she
thinks. A way out, or another Ghoul, or maybe nothing at
all. It would have to be all three to keep everything safe.

Keep the nothing safe most of all.

The chroma, though, is starting to darken. She can't tell
if it's rust, or a different finish. She wants to stop to look,
but the Ghouls aren't stopping. They have an end, she
thinks. How black will it be?

What do the Ghouls see? What do they not want to see,
when they're together?

They wouldn't, she thinks, want to see the eyes of others,
and beings that can shapeshift.

She feels something rise in her. Starts in her, pressing
against the choker. Reverbs through it, a dissolution,
something that becomes unreal in order to find the core





of her. The core of her, the dissolve, the space that's everywhere.

She feels honour. The choker, knowing she's with the Ghouls, is looser now, the chemo it's sending nervous. Because with Ghouls around, she thinks, it'll stay nervous.

The stale air that breaks against her. Trying to shape something that, looking out from behind Ghouls to a creeping darkness, just wants to float.

Keeps her too nervous, she thinks. It's a feeling, deep down inside, she feels like tethering. Why should they tether her, when the soles of her sneakers don't stick when they leave the chroma floor?

Why she should feel tethered if she can leave this earth just by jumping?

Leave this choker, she thinks, just by choosing and finding my natural holic.

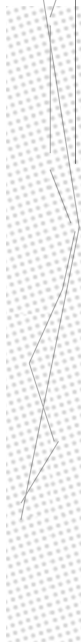
The Ghouls are moving to a door. Light shines around it, like a halo. Something beyond it is trying to break past. If it has a chance to, Cherise thinks, dim and far, it'll make itself bright to her. Before it lets her think about how she

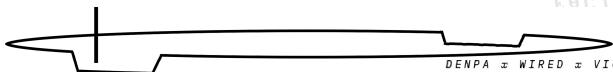


2'
LWCIGI2I
AET
TVCN2 feels about it.

UCCNM2W
WPECENW2
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It will blind her with light before she knows if she even
COMWODC wants to see.

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ROBEN





DENPA x WIRED x VIOLENCE

psycho^{gramma}

ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

by: caraparcels

PSYCHOGRAMMA

Name: samhain

Birthday: 3 january

Sex: female

Occupation: mmorpg moderator

Likes: esoteric magic spells, outrageous fashions, flying

Dislikes: mashed food, military diehards

Blood type: o

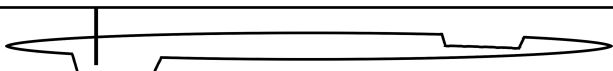
Seen with: kunakida's party on sapphire fantasy, tai shu kwong military units, chihaya

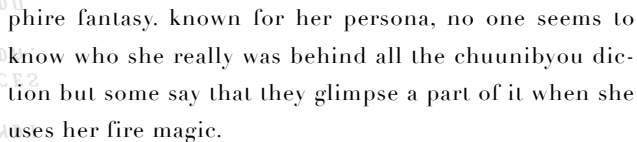


a rumoured sorceress as there had been a few magicians and wandering religious acolytes around the world. tai shu kwong and their reverence for the spiritual decided to integrate them into the wired as their first steps into the next world.

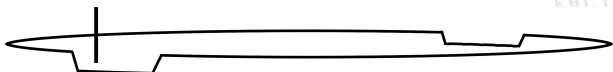
sahmain rose through the ranks, becoming both a data moderator and practices her magic on the mmorpg, sap-

users





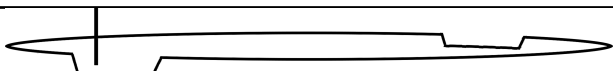
phire fantasy. known for her persona, no one seems to know who she really was behind all the chuunibyou diction but some say that they glimpse a part of it when she uses her fire magic.



due to the prevalence of the wired augmenting space, it is now entirely possible for an individual to be self sufficient. electric signals are able to sustain a person provided there is enough bandwidth in their residence. servers can be built as one's very own cities or room to any specification. however there is one thing that has yet to separate itself from the real world: currency.

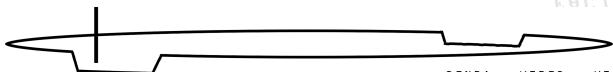
the concept of currency has remained yet its powers are more prevalent than ever. cryptocurrency has been a difficult point for many of the megacorps as it reduces the need for employment. the virtuality of currency become more potent as the virtual has paralleled the real. a person's potential can be realized within the wired however, they are not entirely freed. megacorps have focused on lifestyle services and specialized servers such as rpg's to appeal to other needs apart from money. real world operations are mostly done with either the utmost respect or out of desperation. in order for the individual to function on the wired, a space needs to

updates



be created

the concept of value has become more concrete as the real seems validated once more. tai shu kwong's moon protegee triad hosted an agricultural market performance art featuring food that has been grown in rare soil recovered from cities ruined by floods. there's such fascination with the real to the point there are a fair number of groups such as re-volt-era trying to reclaim it through health and mind frame exercises. interestingly, this is shown through footage of nature documentaries. in fact, many places including brokers within the megacorps are beginning to order plants and waterfalls for their real world offices.



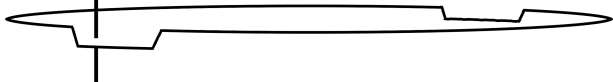
DENPA x WIRED x VIOLENCE

psYCHogramm

ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

Synopsis

users wander the infinite plazas within their internal os. foxtel, one such user, darts between each of these old worlds distinegrating in electric signals, one bullet at a time.



Last Time

ghost or virtual idol? the mysterious inhabitant of floor 888 was once a girl named tohka creuset. foxtel seeks traces of her true personality among the brambles of the wired



cw: firearms, violence, suicide

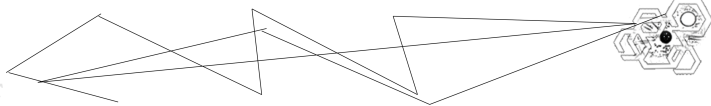
i wake up from a dream, void, brain signals bloom desert whose grains glitter in the cathode moon yet comfort my knees. even if i were to tumble down, my limbs would sprawl out in front of me yet adorned by the sand that could have been momentary stars or static to distort the indigo night, and i would plunge towards a plane where the ball joints of my arms could rotate like the world as the eversummer air slips from my fingers. pinpricks of nerves cleave my arms from sleep, inverting that comforting darkness as my fingers wade through the bright humid air to linger, remembering something just out of grasp apart from the mindless twitches that thaw at the tepid interior climate set at a solid 10 degrees which, should it rise from that, i'd worry the mere fever would warp the room's dimensions. despite placing my palm on the mattress there always seems to be an unseen strain that dulls the touch as if somewhere, my mind is retreating from the

PROTOCOL 02.1: TRANSFER I

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ELECTRICA SIGNALS CONSUMMATION

DENPA * WIRED * VIOLENCE
P5YCHOGRAMM
ELECTRICA SIGNALS CONSUMMATION

2
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TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMMOD
B12N2
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N1BICE2
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VR10W
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forms of reality.

my body always seemed incongruous, bones jut from the knuckle and my limbs seemed almost gangly throbbing out of time unlike metronomic crowds beating with pleasant conversation before parting as if to the cue of an unseen clock whose seconds only emerged from the onslaught of footsteps. sensations always thrash within me only resulting in limp joints or an unseen churning, like lights splashing against a pane obscuring those interior desires, let alone discern their route. perhaps i could hope for some paroxysm that seizes all these wayward affects towards the edge of the world and that somehow, i could realize all that wanting with perhaps a granting of my hand or a little smile here. one that when viper saw, decided to sell me the vp70 after having some leftovers stock telling me the three round burst was perfect for me.

the machine pistol lay disassembled on a desk with the g3ka4. a new recoil spring arrived today, the thought to replace it occurred to me after watching some idol performance by a group called alterna, the girl in serafuku twirling before reaching her hands out as if she wanted the rotations of her step, her voice trembles across electric signals faster than wire yet her longing expression yearned





her to stay in that moment a while longer before leaping to her next steps.

referencing the dimensions and spring rate would apply itself onto the wired where static realizes these simple machines forever animating their levers and springs from the frenzied electric, i boil some water where i toss a glob or miso paste with a block of instant ramen. i also check the garden of gailan, tomatoes and tangerines on my balcony obscured by a greenhouse whose opaque glass hides them from view due to legal complications of growing food in a personal residence in accordance to a sanitation law reducing the spread of either insects or mold on the sterile surfaces. sunrays form shafts of light shoot onto the intersections or across the city's faceless high rises as if that light could begin to connect these separate inhabitants in a plane blessed in gold light that connect all within the structures of heaven's domain.

my intestines churn at the instant noodles though the miso soup bathing them makes it bearable, along with the gailan vegetables added which saturna recommended from a farmer's market performance art installation she did called old festival that put organic food stalls in the idex town patch square in illegal assembly thanks to moon



protégé triad connections or her position in tai shu, who had considerable influence in that area, calling the event an interesting subversion of production.

despite health management, studying and work graphed on the wired, it was important to maintain one's physical body not just for its sake but because some could suffer something called decay-creep where the user's physical state, whose data transfers to the virtual space, affects their online presence. souls with a desire to rid of the damp bodies left in cubic rooms into a bombastic transcendence as their nothingness becomes textured in electric signals, rumours of ghosts or fractured psyches tainted the message boards or the flicker of static clumping into one's last recorded expressions in chat server spaces.

with little to do, i activate virtual space, an iridescent prism encases my dimensions before electricity coats onto the contours of my body that could almost fly across virtual space as the concrete wall in front of me thins into sky, the floor under my hands once dampened in oils no longer smooth to touch as grass grows, resisting against my palms. perhaps this was what people thought of the wired not unlike the pastoral vistas off 21st century desktop computers that promised of that new eden whose electric sky envel-





oped us from our cubic modernity.

i concentrate my thoughts on the image of this field, undulating wildly before leveling out as the static lusher into life-giving air that cooled my breathing into a steady pace and the grass at my fingers grow crisp as i open my eyes, a few images of trees appear ahead in flat images which rotate to give the illusion of a distant 3d object. it'd normally be difficult to create a space like this with the amount of detail as even on the wired, there are psycho-symmetric apparatuses that ensured the exchange of users wasn't distorted by aberrative mental activity which somehow made me feel more remote, how all those feelings dulled across the floor of mall servers and i could only unravel myself slowly, my username, my intentions, my reasons. probably why i couldn't do role-play work either, even though kunakida said that menhera art was popular. i couldn't intertwine my world with another, letting it slip into the wired for another person to see and somehow, some part of me that i never wanted to be would always emerge out of it, some unwanted experience jutted from the shape of my being

now that i was here, i opened my interface, my thoughts in boxed formations with kunakida appearing on one tab and



a smaller one with a daily newsfeed. producer would once tell me that time had a narrative and it wasn't like some slow countdown to a doomsday forgotten by life, or withdrawing into an apartment that never changes apart from the dust that still glimmered in light. whenever i coughed, i couldn't help but laugh a little, lying on the floor thinking if today was the end or maybe someone would find out about the weapons i had and execute me on the spot, the room to be a nice painting like the ones showing on the feed of guro artists but i shake my head and tabs switched back to server spaces and forums.

like the old browsers, this showed single images about exterior events all in a photographic montage of suited men at tribunals, ruined peninsulas and corporate warfare that produced stories about the day, about the life we were supposedly living. despite my aversion to it, i still enjoyed reading them. they all seemed like distant stories that all had their own conclusion even if they were unresolved, much like watching from a window where once people saw an intense variety of pedestrians, perhaps a moment something breaks from the slumped shoulders or darting movements where someone lingers or cleaves forward like a shooting star, i might wish upon meeting them like out of a teen manga but they disappear and i seem utterly stupid





sitting in my room looking at empty streets.

i enter a mall-space server but don't connect so i wouldn't see other users. electric signals adhere to the flat panes of the cubic units around me, a grid forms a cieling where a ventilation system snakes around the complex. shop windows were an empty void usually filling with shopping servers connected through the user's search interests. my image faint across these shining surfaces as if i could be there in these planes, waiting for my figure who existed in its total blankness to burst into a variety of forums or gun mod servers all at my first thought, each pane observed my every angle, yet my steps and limbs remain, binding sensation from these different spheres, constructed in earthly vistas and urban spaces that our steps and conversations remembered that still only reverberate across corridors or skies.

reading off the news feed window i open, there appears to be a public conference online regarding the suspension of the virtual finance and currency minister , cedric shan. the executive council usually were tied to old frontiersmen and political impresarios maintaining society in the way of conferences and exchanges of ideas. that somehow in the empty streets, that belief still imbued the frack signals



that inhabited buildings, while many companies adopted the wired's properties quickly, producing immaterial goods from space augmentations, lifestyle enhancements using electricity rerouting, the executive council served as a formality in the stuffy way someone puts on a suit for some event. should they not be there, some say would risk another corporate war that nearly dissolved the continents amidst climate catastrophe. the only issue was when virtual currency grew to sustain individuals without relying on the council or corps, many arguing whether individuals could become willing participants within society or if they must use their needs to push them. shan represented the groups within the executive council partnering with a company called nexolon to prove the validity of alternate currency which suddenly evaporated its staff and system causing much of the initiative's progress to fold. including one of the coins i was speculating especially since it would gain value based on the amount of pages surfed or works interacted with.

the news of my income folding no doubt caused a long thread of pink fields posting of losses stringing across the page, fortunes blown by the winds of the real world that swept the crtypro currency circles, mass wojacks of day-traders sprouting into mass-delerium. these stir-





rings of affect that seemed to plea to some outside user to glimpse them, or no, perhaps they could find others like them forming the valences or trajectories of something like a movement, the very things that flew through the wired, enmeshed the globe in its inescapable contours. i sit on the floor and spawn my firearms, the g3 and the vp70. standing the rifle, i wrap my inner elbow around the handguard, pressing against its flat side as my forearm rests on the magazine. the vp70 was in my hand, thumb around the curved recess of the grip as i clutch the slide, pulling it back to letting it tense in my hand while it opens the ejection port, the polymer handgun lighter without a magazine inside, clicking the inner mechanisms and actuators, playing in an abandoned hangar that could propel 9mm brass across the space into the encased ether where i found myself faded against, almost spilling out of itself within the window's hard vertices.

while threads lit up on the currency crash, i thought i could try and investigate it, opening the live conference in the wired, the room grows spacious as the walls recede, graphic effects surround before different users pour into their avatars around me. this was always one of those times where i'm reminded of society, that gathering of distinguished individuals in variegated formal attire tailored



just to give enough for everyone to move their arms in languid arcs. even the angled lapels and utilitarian manners of the foxhound jacket seemed excessive to their pencil skirts and overcoats. i simply keep my distance from their disdain and haughty rivalries that flourished within the white noise of static while i track each of their relationships through a separate window, lines graphed between one executive to another, smoothed indicating cordial relation while a spiked line denotes an ongoing conflict regarding patent laws. these abstract geometries represented the exchanges of individuals, labour and ideas forming surfaces unlike the old world spaces we found ourselves in.

a podium loads ahead of us, a wooden veneered edifice with the sigil of the executive council, a stone globe with grey laurels, an old image of the hard rock of the world already sinking into the metal surface. prerecorded holograms of the executive council members, including shan with his head down, walks to the podium, the speaker with a contemptuous manner begins.

‘due to the latest crisis in integrating virtual production, we have decided to shift gears into the fledging physical industries. the volatility of virtual currency is a violation





of the stability of the executive council...'

parts of the conference snap into white, indicating users recording the meeting and taking pictures, breaking the image into fragments that breed the forum posts some of these users moderated, i trace each of the users around me, a matrices form polygons that trace the articles written in real-time and whether they're reporting, critical think-pieces or theoretical journals. the solemn air of this speech from the executive council could not slow the frenzy that multiplied among the chat boards, the connection mesh between these users riveting at each post.

articles formed incongruous shapes which strained at my concentration, the room grows distant as the floor wavers underneath me. despite being unable to focus, the various lines intersecting and arraying between users started to slow their flickers into a rectilinear cube vaulted with a spherical ceiling. before i know it, the conference room breathes into a large hall decked out in arches. a mural of golden eaves flourish the quartz flooring embedded with speckles of opaque rocks that glimmer the meager lighting, as if an everlasting image that would not yield to the static trembling around it. despite the scene before me like something out of a storybook or a roleplay server, the

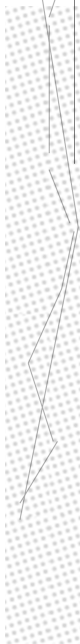


floor hardened pushing against my weight until i no longer feel my own heft with little electricity amplifying my range of motion that couldn't spawn any interface windows. only a stale heat radiates from my body, an invisible creature wrapping itself around me as it murmurs the conversations from the conference. despite the decadent interior's emptiness that almost demanded a kind of reverent silence.

standing at the end of the hall was someone wearing in a suit with glimmering pinstripes, before i realize several of them at each direction of this intersection and i was at the center, a target. the suited individual turns their head to the side, but their eyes fell upon my position in a frightening exactitude. my instinct to run ceased by a woman grabbing my wrist who fed an encrypted connection into my os and the conference room returned with my limbs electrified again, the rotating structures of written affects from surrounding users...

'listen carefully and do not look my way. i am going to transfer us into a secure location.'

all i can see is the brown hand, its surprisingly gentle fingers that summoned this grip i can't free myself from. the conference room and its users shrink, the walls cave a lit-





tle as its surface, white sears a panorama around us before it is filled with an outside world of blank faced skyscrapers and empty streets. an abandoned world and its final structures rid of all into the opaque glass shapes that gapped the sky widening and shrinking around us within this car interior, the real world yet electricity still rivets around my fingers feeling the plush seats underneath me, vibrating slightly from the motors.

the woman now appears in front of me from the lounge seat circled this vehicle's interior. a slightly gaunt but soft face with a sharp haircut reminding me of saturna one time in the past when we were kids and she wanted the tomboy look. the face phases out to reveal faux, the polygon puzzle imitates an inviting expression.

'should've figured that was you...'

'following such trivial news, doesn't seem to fit your style' faux replied, the polygon face shifts into a configuration but one piece still stands, waiting on my answer.

'trivial huh? now that virtual currency's fried, i'm just out of luck it seems' i sigh, worried for when the room becomes barren with the last cup of instant noodles rolls off the tablepane just moments before running amok trying to



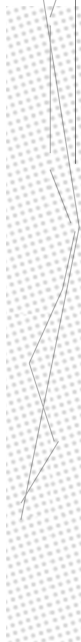
satiate parched veins pumping blood to seize some diminishing life, as a child, i was told to treasure the moments of life in my youth as it seemed the adults around me would hold fast to their bodies to the decomposition of time, that no matter, even their solid presence would unwind into the frequencies around us.

‘hm, well, i have to run an errand by tai shu kwong’s mon-tazuma district, you can think of this as an outing and you get to be in the presence of a pretty face,’ he said, the face from earlier flickers for a moment and i can tell he’s having fun with this. ‘what a shame it seems, it’s almost as if we’re being thrown out of our electric dream.’

‘maybe i’ll see what you look like’

faux’s arrangement in shapes stops a moment but continue to reconfigure.

‘well, so will the major corps right now, tai shu and crine-berg will have to make up their losses as the sudden crash in cryptocurrencies has made them default back to regular currency and physical goods again for the time being. so they’ll need some people to run delivery. traffic will be regulated of course but competition will still be around’





the light from the windows cuts to grey from entering a tunnel, engine noise throngs down it as the pieces of faux's polygonal face shift into place but in a deliberate manner: each block perhaps a facet of a mental state put together in cognitive configurations according to his disguise. when we exit, the face of the young woman returns, flesh smoothing the earlier geometry, eyes holding my focus.

i check the market index and see the crypto stocks falling, these declines, or some call depressions, following the events of crypto server raids, outlawings and even shootings as if the constellations in a blue light heaven that tethered the world's business toiling within it. even the first computer rendered everything in these simple representations even down to the way one remembers, a point that fixes or pauses, a line to indicate movement.

the car comes to a stop, all the agitation of the engine fades, the floor almost hollow without the car's movement. faux hands me a little egg radiating with virtual space.

'honesty is important in business, so why not be your best self?' faux said although i could have done without the lilt in his question that supposes my agreement into this. i take the egg and feel the signals circulate around my head as it becomes almost a relief for when i step outside.



over the edge of the car's interior my shoes scuff on the white sidewalk as i am outside, inertia burdens my limbs beaten of all the grace of the electric that amplified each nerve, now victim to the forces acting upon it, the heavy blue air heated from the harsh sunlight that could melt the city entirely, a deteriorating film, its inevitable end. i wish i had a weapon only to find my empty hand unable to concentrate on anything but its own palm.

sky tore the enclosed walls i was so familiar with into disconnected planars across the streets as if the real world confronted me in their discontinuous structures, my interior folded out into the thin faceless high rises around me, throwing me out of them. . the plaza of tai shu with triangular gardens inserted into the pavement with parasol tables near coffee terminals lavished with a planter's box of ornate bushes. it would also be where they host meetings with outsiders, one of the few real world functions that did not see disuse from something called walking tours, a premium meeting service that combined business connection with urban leisure seeing synthetic ecoscapes or engaging in virtual recreation, work always hovered near.

a female office worker in an androgynous jacket that pared to one into a silhouette stood to meet us at one of the ta-





bles . a utilitarian look with a smart single lapel that cuts diagonally down it concealing all trace of a body. simply a node to produce and reproduce those cordial exchanges called business for the tai shu's montazuma branch. someone that is deemed part of this city as urban planners might imagine associations and dealings flowing around plazas that could come together as easily as a romance.

'you must be fatimara, i am angel tan-pena'

'indeed, i am. i have also brought my assistant, riaru' faux (fatimara) mentions.

into the building is a large lobby room entering a near-featureless corridor where signals stir but only enough to keep us walking in graceful strides where angel opens her palm to materialize an interface window where from just the circling of her finger, a layout was mapped where we walked across a glass corridor with different offices with brokers having pleasant conversations that would dance around that all affirming handshake, another broker relaxes in their office chair but less out of slack and more with the intention to share that leisure with his client. we even glimpse a long glass pane of that one v-idol from alterna who leaps over a stage into a grassy knoll now donning mage attire for one of their fantasy mmo's. it all seemed



like the clock that would run these businesses mercilessly had dissolved and each segment of wall only paused the constant beating of pleasant commerce as correspondences didn't tick so much as pulsate these appendages of capital near granted out of the electric signals as angel enables a program to show virtual lines meeting until they formed different shapes all connected together into the form of the sea, almost as if their philosophy was in that frantic yet serene mass of water. perhaps an image saturna might have contributed.

we reach an empty common area with a large waterfall in the center pooling into a spring surrounded by stones. we sit at a circular table poured into an hourglass leg with a glass teapot at the center. water ripples from the falls, each splash slows for a second to catch the skylight as i realize that the contained virtual space manipulates the waterfall's speed slowing to the observer who could almost make out the beads of water that break from the plunge. such images were something to both motivational characters and spiritual practitioners alike, if it were to be believed, that when the electric signals could realize the user's every cognitive function, it would supposedly maximize human capability in labour and metaphysical spheres, yet it always seemed like my body was careening





in some kind of freefall with flashes of a place to land, just a moment. then i realize we were seated for a few minutes now, faux hadn't said anything (perhaps in contemplation) and neither has angel whose gaze flickered between us.

'that's a pretty waterfall?' i mention, relieved that the virtual space egg altered my hesitant voice pattern into a smoother cadence transmitting over the electric signals into an appealing compliment, as if the voice from one whose rhythm i'm always out of time with.

'yes, it offers a bit of peace given that work is busy this time of the month but we're all hanging in there.' she smirks almost giving a wary expression but with one of those happy resignations that would ask for anything more, anything different.

'i see, i do hope you can catch a break. i know tai shu is under a lot of pressure right now.'

'well, we may have had to restructure some of our virtual currency operations but we just redirect that to more physical projects like reforestation. you should see some sustainability projects in the olden asia peninsula' she says opening an interface on some new forests tai shu planted around asia as well as using old ruins as recycled material.



a project i thought ended as much of the damage from the climate catastrophe had been cleaned a few years earlier.

the conversation between us seemed amiable despite my darting from one topic to the next to keep our delighted words afloat, faux (or at this point, fatimara) steps in.

‘i’d like to know more about your courier packages? the recent fallout of virtual currency and virtual production from the executive council must be inconvenient’

my interface receives a signal as faux takes over.

‘yes, it has caused some problems. but you made a very good choice to get in our reserve transport services.’

‘i was actually thinking of crineberg’s given their looser policies’

‘yes, they do have a free approach, but with our package, we provide protection should anything happen from asylum and other benefits. we’ll even throw in a loss claim since i’ve heard of your reputation’

‘thank you.’ fatimara nods. ‘the main thing is i want to bring the virtual space infrastructure or any modernization to low bandwidth areas. many of them have sects that



are opposing it'

'yes, it is rather unfortunate that they refuse to be part of the market.'

'yes, it would benefit us to build up infrastructure, one person at a time.'

their words were cool, deliberate responses as if an unchecked utterance might give the other's intentions away, both ennui and cold response, feigned or not, their sips of tea offer no relief other than a simple transit from one topic to another, a rest in its rhythm darting imports or deals. angel sets up a document to sign and faux does, as i half expect to see some trick in his scrawl that conjures the fake signature

'we will have more details on your assignments. intel on the outskirts will be an asset when you make a delivery.'

'i always appreciate the level of care and attention that tai shu puts in their client's well-being. your service is an example of such.'

'thank you ms. fatimara. we appreciate your time.' angel completes this with a cursory handshake and a moment

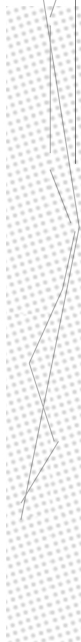


after, turns to me with a smile that nearly wrinkles her porcelain hued features but assures that we were somehow similar with our exhaustion from our work that delivered us from the flashes light thrown through aimless days

back to the car, electric signals lighten my movements. faux pulls up angel's file and searches information about her past dealings, his hands trace her routine as the data comes to him, rumours of using moon protégé triad members in forum space moderation or development assistance in pattern-manipulative voting. he also enables a program to modify the image at the window, awnings dress up the once faceless buildings with screens of shop interiors from various commercial servers.

he scrolls, and narrows his eyes (still wearing the face) 'seems like our friend viper is organizing at a nearby building that's being speculated by castle forest. kalashnikov rifles have been smuggled in. someone careless i suppose. expect him to contact you.'

'i guess even destruction can still be profitable...'. viper looking for me would usually arouse some faint excitement of getting into trouble like a childhood prank but with the things he's involved in, it only seems more of a nuisance.





‘well, i am interested in what forced the virtual production’s closure. the executive council must have had to act fast. but i suppose what the corporations and the council have in common is value. if their value goes, then so do they. they really are the fossils of an old order but then again, who ever thought someone could use a company like a bomb’ the face disperses revealing unconnected cubes floating in a cloud, the piece of an urban map. ‘maybe, this could something for you to look into...a nihilist economy and its psycho killer...’

the thought gave way to the image of a horror poster, a shadow entwined individual whose ghoulish face melts on a popsicle-like knife in their unseen hand. but if there was some crisis, some unknown that haunted forums, i could connect these discontinuous incidents torend it some conclusion, a surface that one could append..

faux opens pages on his interface to track crineberg, using a bot to fill crineberg’s delivery form page until it reaches an obligatory thanks page for the form’s completion. ‘i’ve directed their assignments to you. a vehicle preformatted to fit their standards should be arriving through some of my networks. not to worry, it’s quite nice looking. i’ve ex-



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AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
G1N6BBV
COMWOD0
B12N2
E1V1IDV
N1B1ICE2
23E
2026END1
112NW
0N12
V1IDN
W1ENW
D0G0VE
E1
FVBOVE
A1N1
1WCIDIDN
1EW1OB
E1D2WOD
2E1D0
WE1E11
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
W1E1
211
D0G0B
1B2NW
F0B1W

amined many car catalogues to get exactly what you might like'

'i've never driven before.'

'the car's interface and drive controls are set up so it's like a game so stalling won't happen. and don't worry about the fee. i'll just take a commission off your deliveries'

from one of the windows into the shopping servers, a face stares directly at me, a bulky visor casing blocked its eyes but behind the apparatus, cast blue light dying their nose and their lips stout against a clean face, traces of a human visage, perhaps the real world only known in olfactory nightmare, their jacket lapels sharp, slicing through the data swathing past them, as we were driving, the red visor dashed from the window but it marked our connection, our axes had been set.

'all you need to do is wait on their word. in the meantime, take some time to relax. with these contracts, we'll gain information the old fashioned way'

he stops at my building but his polygonal shroud obscures what looks like a diamond where i cannot approximate his expression. the car shakes momentarily as the contours of





the pillars melt into pixels rubbing themselves out, faux retains his seating position until his image fades, the car's interior forms flat surfaces surrounding me in a cubic formation, work bench and table at the center load in and the leaves off the greenhouse shake as i find myself back in my room sitting face to face with a table of anime figurines of dancing idols and gunslinger girls. the unexpectedness of finding myself back home would have been comedic but then faux was never a particularly funny person to begin with, missing the opportunity to warp me mid-air to drop me on the floor. then again, i ought to have felt shocked that faux could even move the user's psychoavatar and their body (os-unit) at the same time. though faux always was like this, a user that was akin to a city, or rather an axis within it redirecting where people needed to be whether by word or directly. maybe when the wired modeled itself after century old cities and plazas, faux became that unknown flaneur who sauntered the streets that would gravitate, no, danced towards where he would be going in off shoot streets and hidden alleyways unwinding before him.

i still had the virtual space egg with me as i feel its contours against my own, feeling where it diverges and where it meets upon my flesh. disabling it, i still felt the need to



wipe my face with the back of my hand as if to physically discard that façade. frequencies of muted signals from the electric appliances somehow made the featureless ceiling waver in its solidity akin to a sky where our past and present selves sublimate into the humid warmth emitted from these too still limbs.

tai shu kwong of new shenzhou and crineberg of edgeley stratum. corporate warfare is a constant almost as natural as animal predation or whatever primordial image justifies the invisible violence within those faceless buildings, abstracted into data, white boxes flicker in the void,

i send bots to gather information and search current events for tai shu and crineberg relating to their recent virtual activity. as electric signals melt into a cooling mist that unveil undying trees in full bloom on the shore where the polychromatic surface of the ocean crinkles in metronomic beats before a gridded sky as if its image overlook all the sectors of this wireframe, ready-made paradises that idle on old desktops or calendars pinned to cubicles scratching out days for the one we hoped our efforts and their repeated doings will unravel into where we might splay ourselves on the sand, to live a good life.

circling my palm brings company scandals, recent shifts





from different patch companies from a recent acquisition suspected to be movement from their killteams, implementing new patch areas deemed as low service. darting my hand brings info about the restoration of mining facilities with some areas even considering a draft for employees with images of sunburnt men glowing under the daylight, polished by the muscle produced from their repetitive tasks. the list of these are followed with suicides, rooms cordoned off with faceless officers from tai shu walking around the annihilation surrounded in clean quadilateral surfaces, once broken gestures that now intersect into structures of mental illnesses, deteriorated living conditions. no immediate care and other circumstance that would complete the site of self destruction., another, crineberg's tactical team made up of ex-military loaded up with both armaments and company benefits taking out a car that was tailing them, trapping said car into a killbox formation with a soldier at each corner aiming at the interior where the occupants were faceless until peering closer the blank visage fills with my reflection, silhouettes surround and i immediately jump back damn near knocking over a glass case of figurines as the screen flashed red and a character topples over holding its waving pose, greeting from a near scrape, blood splotches on the glass of the car in the article, thousands of commentaries react, pinning



it on tai shu and another proclaiming crineberg having agents everywhere, all these individuals clamour in their seconds of attention sifting past until it ceases with feeds on how to avoid being a neet, executives talking about how they no longer were hikki's joining the plain lighting of corporate interviews, somehow, their freshly pressed suits and long jackets ridded them of frenetic images that might lapse their serial answers of overcoming and triumphs.

i open tai shu's mmorpg and message kunakida if she wants to run a few raids with me. after a few moments, i get an enthusiastic response from her to join a locals jp server as she had been working on her japanese and wanted to test it out on unsuspecting players and finally walking among virtual pastures effervescent in radiant limbs. she met me at her house server's yard with a mage class avatar, her soft face contrasted the wrinkled sorcerer's robe and crooked witch hat, her legs bare as if walking on the beach.

'i thought viper was being unsanitary.' i said referring to a time when viper had bags of trash fill his room both paranoid about some of the stuff he was throwing out and to ward off advertisers.'

'oh you're gonna pick now to bug me about my habits?', □□
hmp' she exclaims then turns away and i follow her as



she picks up her steps , for those little adventures across these rolling hills.

at a hub village, iron wrought signs swing from the sides of houses with straw-thatched roofs, arched entrances and cross decorated windows. guilds of rmt traders barter loot drops and cosmetics while some knight class players patrol to make sure no one was butting lines or causing a ruckus. in some moments, i almost forgot this was still a server. a space mediated with images from isekai stories. perhaps all of us in this place we hoped the wired would always be: a portal into worlds that released us from hard geometries and smoothened surfaces prone to aching feet and limbs sapped from the constant vitality spurred from stylized images but could only spasm of small stimulations.

thankfully, this mmo was quite lenient on what kind of weapons were allowed so i imported the g3 and vp70 despite kunakida's complaints that i was 'fail-rp-ing.' the parties around us gather experience or items, trying to find that one grand moment of vanquishing high level enemies or duel other parties or recovering treasures, all this suspended within a grand blue sky of wish fulfilling clouds. kunakida meets up with her party, a bevy of knights and



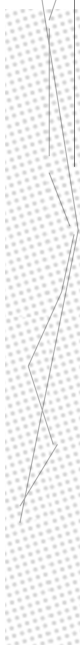
wolfboys gathered around her with quests and rare item rumours that would hover over the next hour. a mage in twin tails was at their periphery with a bored expression, not paying attention to the conversation just beside her.

entering a forest, we encounter a couple slimes and a few ogres with clubs. the latter stomps after me whilst one of the mages erects their hands toward the approaching slime, a glow casts between their fingers.

‘conjure them into ash, tai-fo’ they incant

a blast of red shoots from their palm engulfing the slime as i attach the stock-holster to the vp70, leaning into the machine pistol’s heel staring down the sights, an ogre caught between two iron posts behind the ramped front sights forged from the ensuing muzzle flash blooming ahead with burst fired rounds concentrated onto the ogre’s head, murky viscera cues the enemy’s defeat animation. the second ogre approaches with a club bringing it down with a cloud of smoke where i emerge above already about to land ,the g3’s shot spears through the uneven flesh of the creature flinching from critical damage.

the monsters drop items from potions, rare necklaces and craft material across the grass, one of the knights in over-





sized armour gathering in-game currency for rmt conversion and splitting the treasures in this field that bore dew and gold. i took my cut, remembering the in-game motor-scooter was absurdly expensive. while the twin-tailed mage, hesitates a split second before assuming a heightened manner becoming her character.

‘you seem to have aptitude in the bodily apexes’ she mentions, i think in some chunni way saying i have movement-combat experience. ‘no mortal user can use a firearm with precision and agility without additives unless they use one in the real world’

‘well, one ought to reach the heights of one’s ability, isn’t it??’

‘truly, it sounds as if you are in between worlds.’ she narrows her eyes and i wonder if she’s examining via interface. ‘while kunakida might not mention it, i’ve heard of a user who’s a ghost on the electric dreamscape, sister of information and an assassin in the real world. the latter are a rare species as this is relegated to the businesses in the ivory towers ” i had partaken in assassination work in the past under the producer’s direction and despite the thrill it brought in the matching axes, being able to reify myself in a world crumbling in gunfire, the hardness of every-



thing began to unnerve me in a kind of sepulchral way, like finding rock underneath the earth where nothing grows.

‘well, the wired is full of possibility isn’t it?’

‘but it seems you have yet to understand the true possibilities of the electric dreamscape’

‘come again?’

‘behind you’

before i knew it, i whip myself to face the mage, instinctively drawing the vp70 only for it to click upon pulling the trigger, the grip hollowed from the missing magazine. yet the other members of the party continue their cheer completely unaware, until their image ripples and i find out we’re in a closed space, a technique that can close off an entire area that can be controlled by a single user even overriding the parameters of anyone within it, and before my own psycho silhouette was established, she must have used the gap in my attention, thinking to avoid a potential strike from her staff, to despawn the magazine.

‘you underestimate the power of an electric dreamscape sorceress,’ she places her hand over her face, delicate eyes





flicker between her fingers that seemed to hold an invisible mask these chuuni magicians really are something, mastering the art of distraction from their theatric manners. 'you ought to realize your world of eternal reticles is not so different of the world of glittering signals'

as my psycho-silhouette establishes enough of a boundary to separate our actions, i can begin to act freely, sliding a magazine into the polymer handgun whilst spawning in the stock to set the weapon to burst-fire.

'go ahead' she smirks, 'a simple bullet has one trajectory but my spells have discarded these rigid lines'

around me i start to see the signals take shape creating threads that begin to surround me, routing all the potential areas of effect from her attack, but more than that, the closed space loomed with her intent as i felt shrinking into its coming wake. then, the closed space disappears returning us into a shallow sea of grass that blurs the sensation under my back as i find myself on the ground. the other party members looked at me in confusion before turning to the mage who just shrugged as if not even recognizing what happened. kunakida helps me up, still eyeing the mage at her periphery.



‘are you bullying people again?’ she asks me.

‘really? you’re gonna pin this on me?’

‘someone’s got to, i can’t believe you’re always trying to strain the believability of the mmo’

‘that’s funny coming from a mage’

‘magic needs specific configurations you know!’

and it went on, though as much as she ragged on me, it wasn’t unpleasant, our banter emitted the warm center of the earth that beat through this historic knoll as we part ways from the party, the chuuni mage makes a face, pulling the skin under her eye with her middle finger, a pink smile.

kunakida skipped along, flaunting one of the movement executables that buoyed each step allowing them graceful leaps from one point to another on the golden dirt path. i had yet to really maintain use of these exe’s as it was enough that i had to adjust my senses towards allowing myself to use the g3 properly without it disorienting me every time i pulled the trigger, each shot always close to rending the world entire. kunakida does a full turn, the





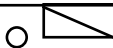
pool of air catches her step to see two figures at the hill in black suits, their attire unlike any of the flashy armor or ornate robes of mages but merely shadows of modernity, not even looking to conceal themselves,

‘someone’s missing the urban.’

they keep their distance, faces concealed by their bulky head units, their lips turned to our direction, our movements and surroundings rendered in graphs and wireframe. one time the producer took me and saturna to a populated area and told us to observe recurring actions between the people chatting at doorways, forming matrices connecting them to trace the routes of surveillance units and how to evade them as we shifted through alleyways into backrooms when pursued.

‘let me handle this (* ^ ∇) ♪,’ kunakida winks, heading over to their direction. a spider program connection activates from her end to mine allowing me to listen in on her while i leave my hand down near my thigh holster, equipping steady aim items from the inventory.

‘heey’ she gives a huge wave over to them before asking. ‘haven’t seen you guys before, are you new players? ^ ω ^’



‘haven’t seen those costumes before. are you part of a team? (· · ?’

the two suits remain silent, and i notice the light from their headgear pales their faces, as if their blood gave way to the data flickering in their unseen eyes, i could only imagine the interfaces running at the face of kunakida who, from the spider program’s view, lowers her gaze in thought, perhaps pouting, before she continues.

‘did you want to go to one of the guilds? are you looking for a quest? there are a lot of parties that are always looking for members! ($\Xi \nabla \Xi$)’ she suggests. one of the suited men, who i can discern has a slight beard only turns to his companion, colour returns to their face for a moment as if blinking a sequence of messages to each other, indicating an exchange of information. kunakida, after her gyrations of being a representative moderator for this mmo, latches onto one of their hands which causes a slight wince from the suited man, their silence endures all that contact almost as impersonal as nature, or finance, an unseen flow.. ‘come on, i can take you to the nearest guild! they can help! ($\wedge _ \wedge$)’



i'd thought they might play along but they were not concerned with the theatrics. eventually, they disconnect from the server, kunakida's hands fumble into each other as they no longer grasp anything and she breathes a sigh of relief, returning to the normalcy of the forested path, wind blows the stunted static from earlier in hoping for a change of air, or conversation. kunakida only comes back almost blasted of any mirth from earlier, a wind-up toy that has spent its last rotation. she pauses a moment then, throwing herself into my chest, the shock throws my hand off my thigh holster.

'uwawawawawa that was so scary >.< i thought i was gonna die'

i wasn't sure whether she was really scared or just playing it up for the role, but i let my hand rest while glomped by kunakida, relieved at the moment of rest we afforded in this world apart from the geometries of our rooms, glowing in cathode lights, our inescapable yet similar contours that populate these buildings and photographs online.

disconnecting from the mmo, the network falls as my weight sinks onto my mattress where i stare at the featureless ceiling as i try to piece everything together, perhaps a glint off the marble surface above me, flashing in my



2
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2M
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMMOD0
B12N2
EVBVIDV
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
J12NW
D12
V12NW
WVWV
D12
E1
FVBOKE
W1N1
IWCID1D1
LEWBOV
E12WOD
2E1DO
WE E11
V1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WVW1
211
D12
1B2NW
FVWV

mind, an idea, the crypto-crash and the company disappeared with the assets, the changing industries as the index rises on physical resources such as mining operations for development/redevelopment projects, sustainability projects bourne from the scarcity of natural lands, virtual assets and currency linked to the value of both physical and virtual goods, their markets in a kind of cat's cradle and i can only attempt to forge a connection to perhaps weave all these separate entities and ideas together, powerlines from one building to another, mapping where each of their energies circulate towards although the trajectory was vague despite the sagging wires, a plain and its scattering of stars unable to find the point that centers everything. i check my vp70, sliding a magazine in with a round slotted into the ejection port. despite the bright shots of light from energy saving desk lamps, the dimness of the room still encroaches upon me and i lay on my bed, almost as if the performer to an unseen audience, a performer that only creases their bedsheets, secreting oils whose vitality only resolves in allowing itself to breathe its next moments. the polymer handgun's actuators, levers, bolts and spring at the palm of my hand before releasing the slide that runs across the tracks as the bulged muzzle encloses over the barrel from a blade cut from the sides off the slide's curvature/arched tunnel, a round chambers





from the magazine that would spring a chain of gunfire. staring down the sights, an iron wave parted in the center by a single thread standing before a blackened runway, a white dot just at the edge, a moon that affixed the sudden ignition of gunpowder.

a deep intake of air reaches deep into my lungs enough to feel their fullness and i enter the grassland again, feeling their leaves under me, almost reawakening my tired limbs but without any need to rise. the ceiling now a deep blue where i could lose myself in but it was clear, almost too sharp like out of a high fidelity image and i can make out some waves smeared across it as if a from a heatwave. attempting to focus and level my breathing does little to abate the whispers that batter the once peaceful breeze in high tone exclamations and laughter, the clear sky becomes murky, almost melting. in the distance where the field, as i could see, ended in gentle hills, stood a figure of light. i quickly activate the infographic to id them which only turns up a name: "the luminous king" their gestures fluid, melding into the series of continuous movements, easily assimilating itself with footage of crowds, matching the hand that reaches into the sky as the commercial asks 'what is it that one truly wants in this life' or the lasting image of those just out of reach, the once playful grass



freezes as a floor seals me off from them, now a simple mural that my soles flattened against. 'the luminous king reaches their hand out as a small sun lowers to their palm, gradually engulfing the area into darkness, voices rushing into white noise. my own fingers twitch, unlike their smooth movements, as if fighting some urge to run as i keep myself firm towards the devastation around me, the winds tear at my jacket where i let my hands follow the violent air for a second to wrench out the g3 from the harness, the stock already extended, the luminous king is enveloped in a titled iron crown surrounding a threaded halo, glowing from the muzzle flash.

as sound returns, i find myself in an empty room akin to a default space to find myself surrounded by mannequins lined up at my sides. what were they even there for, these models of a person, that shape that always eludes us despite their similarity in limbs attached to torso and head. the shape of a world in flat surface ,blank images surround me, their frames held in four corners, dimensions of windows or plazas. an empty room for a child to play in, barren of all interior edges that can cause injury. a place that people escaped with their frenetic movements and thoughts breeding across electric signals.





movement spikes out of my reverie as i draw the vp70 while walking between the mannequins, each shot a darkened thunderbolt striking down upon the composite bodies with the chorus of shell casings glittering on the floor as i spun on my sole, catching myself on my other foot before striking down another until their pieces lay before me, crumbling as if under pressure deforming them until they were no more.

a pulpy surface unsheathes across metal from the real world, the sound wrenches me from my reverie as the empty room grows in size, now populated in work tables and anime figurines. a black envelope delivered into the mail slot. letter writing becoming its own cultural phenomenon, analyzing paper cerases and typographies for the data of emotions we might never know, tempered into the language. the paper reveals blueprints of a car. faux's delivery arrived and the brochure included a modifications such as 'bosozoku super silhouette kit', 'bulletproof reinforcement', 'virtual space cockpit', 'tounge arcade handling model', 'extensive auto-pilot functions'. 'hidden compartment'.

stepping out, different doors line the halls each without distinguishing features apart from their numbers usually



displayed upon one's internal os, a faint light spills on a faraway face whose body sinks in the half darkness, eyes obscured with some kind headgear. i huddle to the wall, hand near the vp70 anticipating the possibility of a fire-fight, light fixtures fizzle like suspended agitation of particles only vibrating in ambient drone. my heart slows as i ascertain that they aren't going to follow, keeping a hand hovering near the thigh holster before doubling back to the elevator.

at parking level 3, an inclined front wing planed up to the bumper, the faint outlines of an old ambassador coupe with chrome accented grilles and geometric lights but the manners of this vehicle had been thrown by the large boxy fender flares that sunk the door giving it the silhouette of geometric lightning bolt that would shoot across expressways, lighting up the night in endless backfires rousing the sleepy high rises from their muted civility, the ghosts of raucous festivals haunting the thoroughfares celebrating the beings that could level this world. despite the archaic design, the chassis is fitted with spheres at the axles, shielded by wheel disc facades, and the center like many contemporary vehicles, allowing subtle adjustments to the way the car feels as each sphere manipulates turning circles and body roll. i enter, the instrument panel glows in





an angular shroud showing tachometer and energy capacity from the solar cells in the rear.

viper messages me to meet him at a building in the old suzuru district, and i gently press on the pedal, the car moves forward and the steering provides enough force to make each turn smooth as the engine hums along the parking garage before the concrete ceiling melts away into sunlight, emerging into the empty street, gunning it down, fighting the slide from the handling model making it susceptible to oversteer until i'm parallel with the curb each avenue flashes with light between the faceless building, transforming these streets into its own route out of their intersections sprawled across the horizon, realizing curves out of the angled road layouts and blurring the hardened edges of city blocks.



2
LWCIGI2I
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2VM
MPECENM2
ATUEBVV
COMMOD0
B12N2
EUVV1D4
PTIBICE2
23E
2025END1
1B2NM
0N12
VGI0N4
MVENV
DOTOVE
E1
TUBOVE
M1N1
IMCIDIDN
LEMBOR
E102MOD
2ED DO
ME EGIL
VDIB12CI
1N8
COM2EC1E
MWE1
211
DOTOB
1B2NM
T0BEM





Name: Rraihha Braz

Birthday: 8 August

Sex: female

Occupation: Commissioner

Blood type: A

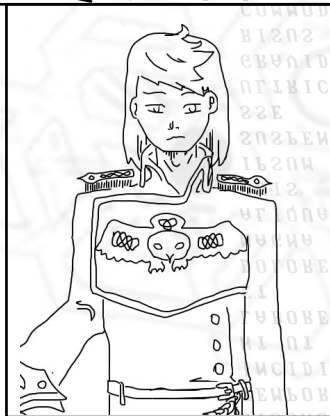
Likes: flower smells, big windows, mystery novels, trains, places where no one knows her rank

Dislikes: waiting rooms, civilian politicians, internet culture, uneducated opinions, male sexual display

Seen with: Ymañn Ulwenn, General Shaïgnar, government officials

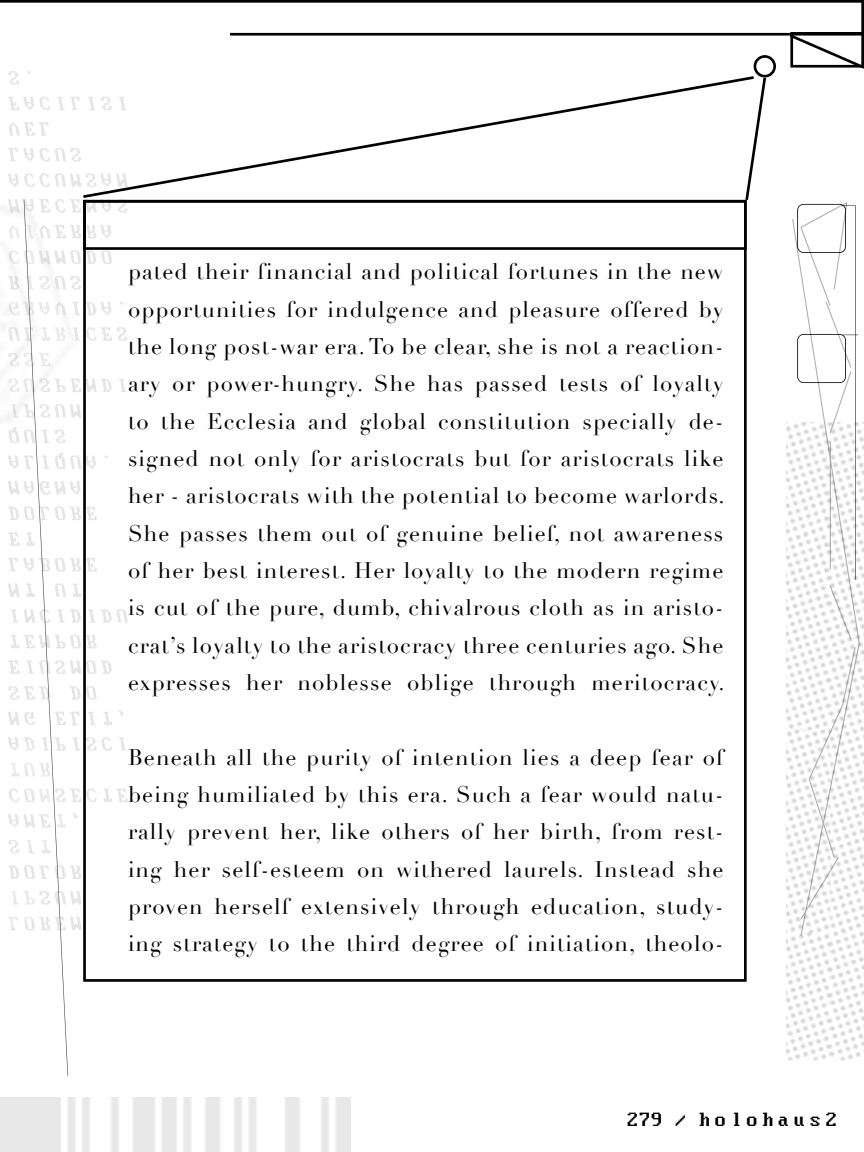
Theme song: Figgy Duff - Weather Out The Storm

Commissioner Rraihha Braz is one of the last major aristocrats of Elthazan (her family holds the title of Marquis to a strategically significant mountain region, though she was not directly in line for the position) not to have dissi-



IT'S A GOOD THING
the DARK LORD
is a shut in!

by: [baroquespiral](#)



pated their financial and political fortunes in the new opportunities for indulgence and pleasure offered by the long post-war era. To be clear, she is not a reactionary or power-hungry. She has passed tests of loyalty to the Ecclesia and global constitution specially designed not only for aristocrats but for aristocrats like her - aristocrats with the potential to become warlords. She passes them out of genuine belief, not awareness of her best interest. Her loyalty to the modern regime is cut of the pure, dumb, chivalrous cloth as in aristocrat's loyalty to the aristocracy three centuries ago. She expresses her noblesse oblige through meritocracy.

Beneath all the purity of intention lies a deep fear of being humiliated by this era. Such a fear would naturally prevent her, like others of her birth, from resting her self-esteem on withered laurels. Instead she proven herself extensively through education, studying strategy to the third degree of initiation, theolo-



gy to the fifth and history to the sixth, as well as passing twelve standardized combat exams. In none of these fields (except perhaps her exceptional physical constitution) is she a genius - simply a dedicated worker and a scholarly temperament, who continues to dedicate much of her free time to reading and study long after having achieved all relevant credentials. Despite this, her rapid promotion through the ranks of the Elthazan military, which values seniority and "real" military experience (this largely means performance in wargames, and effectively, more seniority and nepotism), even in a time of peace, over book learning and even combat skills would not have happened if not for her name, as a token of the military's continuing alliance with the aristocracy. On some level, we believe she knows this, and simply compensates for the artificiality of her position by being as genuine in everything she does as possible. She excels at living up to all sorts of expectations, but would be just as humiliated by admitting that she is do-

ing so, so she finds reasons in themselves to meet them.

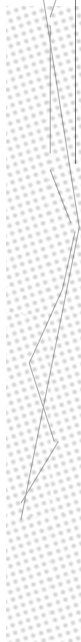
All of these complexes made her an exceptional candidate for Commissioner - the military of Elthazan's primary oversight in the extremely delicate and risky operation the Ecclesia and Human Defense Alliance are currently running inside their borders. Despite concerns that she might be too sincere for psychological operations, she learned the principles of containment quickly, and the inverse of her sense of noblesse oblige is a barely-concealed disdain for the less exhaustively self-realized (the Dark Lord most of all) that combined with her extensive historical knowledge has produced a ruthless and intuitive manipulator. She has become something of a protege of the visionary General Shaïgnar of the Human Defense Alliance, Martolod's hand-picked successor, and has been an especially stabilizing presence for the [Taboo Preserver], whose preference for being alone was shading worryingly into loneliness in several psychological evaluations before Braz's appointment. Recently we have approved



forms of intimacy between them that have been historically unusual for [Taboo Preservers]. The exception may be more dangerous for Braz, whose own social life has been almost entirely official for several years, than for Ymañn, but she has not indicated any dissatisfaction, and we hope they will see in each other a model of dedication.



2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20M
WRECE102
G11NEB80
COMW000
B1202
E100100'
G11BICE2
23E
2026EAD1
1120W
0012
011000'
W000W
D000E
E1
T000E
M101
1WC10100
1E000
E102W00
2E100
W00E11'
00101001
100
COM2E1E
00E1'
211
D000E
1120W
T000E





it's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!

Synopsis

luskonneg remains dormant by a curse and a conspiracy, social peril, online conflicts and miniscule destructions litter the interior of the small Pandora's box of his life, a hidden cornerstone on which stands an unstable world.



Last Time

it has been xxxx days since luskonneg has become a shut-in, the ecclesia keeps it that way under the watch of the [taboo preserver] who watches as he makes an unanticipated excursion, an odyssey all the way across the street



CW: slurs, masturbation, possessiveness, fantasy objectification, cogitohazard, OCD/perfectionism triggers, psychosis

Even though the internet was back up, it would be weeks and weeks before it was the same again.

Some of Luskonnig's favourite artists and posters still didn't have it for a few days - or have power, for all he knew. Connections were slow at times. Threads bumped at half their previous pace - except the ones speculating about the attack. Which was pointless. There was barely a trickle of information to build on, making most of the rumours obvious and silly in comparison, and the most interesting conspiracy theories were all censored. So many anons would gleefully dogpile the next idiot to say it was an inside job or the Dark Lord did nothing wrong, which happened so predictably, Luskonnig wanted to believe some kind-hearted trolls were now taking bans for

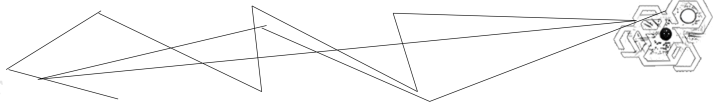
REF
TUCN2
VCCNM2VM
WUECEM02
N1NE8BV
COMMOD0
B12N2
CBV01D0
N11BICE2
22E
2025EWD1

12345
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1MCID1D0
1E6BOB
E102MOD
ED DO
WE ERI1
12112C1
COM2
DO
1E2

THE
DARK
LORD
DOES
NOT
EXIST

FAILURE 02: CURSE

2
LVCIF
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
QINERBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EYVAIDW
NIBICE2
23E
2026ENDI
112NW
0N12
V710W
WVENW
DOROVE
E1
TUBOVE
W1N1
IWCIDIDN
LEWBOV
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE E711
VDB12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOROV
1B2NW
TUBEW



the team, just to keep the threads going. Five days in, everybody knew they sucked, but nobody could stop talking about it.

‘Repetition-compulsion’, Luskonnig typed.

‘What’s that?’ came the reply in seconds.

‘You can show off your fancy theological education but it doesn’t change the fact you’re on here with the rest of us,’ the second appeared while he was typing.

It wasn’t a theological term, he explained, it was psychological, and he knew it from watching *The Consulting Analyst*, which was a detective show for entry-level plebs he would have assumed they had seen in middle school, unless they were too young to be on this board. It meant when someone who has experienced a trauma feels the need to repeat it over and over again, either in dreams and delusions, or through some action that reminds them of it. What this thread was repeating was the first few days of wondering what had happened, what would happen next, whether they were safe. (The days he had not-so-mercifully missed.)

The silence was longer on this one.





‘Yeah some people are definitely just making the same post every few hours.’

Luskonnig had done this a few times though, it could be fun to see the different responses the same post would get each time.

And then, the interesting posts didn’t get any replies. For instance: “Seer In The Half Light. Watch if this gets censored within the hour.”

Of course if it was real it wouldn’t be, now that they had said that. And if it was, it probably wasn’t real. The censors were smart with rumours, knowing exactly what would and wouldn’t attract attention if it disappeared. But those were good arc words for some kind LARP or ARG. That was probably why others weren’t engaging with it. The attack had been serious - even though nobody had died except a few guardsmen in skirmishes with the shapeshifters and one elderly patient whose life support had gone down with the power, for most people it had just meant dark and cold and no internet. Luskonnig who had experienced much worse on this account than most couldn’t stand the over-seriousness. Then again, he wasn’t sure if he could bring himself to be appropriately solemn even in a real tragedy. Good thing that’s never going to happen. I’ve



been hearing about this whole 'Dark War on Terror' my whole life and the enemy is... barely even strong enough to hurt me. (He spent the next two minutes adding details to a fantasy he had returned to almost hourly over the past week - in which he hadn't been able to drag himself out to the coffeeshop, internet hadn't come back at such a convenient time, and he had starved to death in this very apartment, his rotting corpse found by one of those scheduled maintenance people he had freaked out and thrown a wet cumsock at last time. Not without controversy, he became the second official civilian casualty of the Incident already fading from people's minds, once the timing of his death and the (non)-activities leading up to it became clear. He became an icon to hikkikomori worldwide, who held online vigils for him and bombarded the government with messages demanding high-speed internet access be treated as a human rights issue alongside the no less unusual necessities provided equally vulnerable sufferers of chronic illness. In the mainstream his death was still considered not even strictly the terrorists' fault, and prompted a more serious national conversation on the hikkikomori phenomenon which despite the staggering numbers like him he knew existed, had always failed to materialize, presumably due to the hypocrisy and shame of the general public. His parents... here he always found it hard to go



further.) I worry about everything else on the planet, and even I can't bring myself to worry about this. All it is is a drama the public, the normie world, the namefag world, uses to entertain itself, speculating on real life like it's an anime, but hypocritically pretending to be solemn and respectful about it. Because they never allowed themselves to admit the real world will never have an exciting, meaningful story like the shows they watched as kids, they have to collectively LARP something like this. Even the Dark cultists are in on it, they're only like that because even normies would become like me if they didn't exist. How can you blame the role-players and fanficcners when you're doing the same thing except you've suspended your disbelief so far that you can't even admit to yourself that the story's getting boring and needs a few new twists, or even a parody? Maybe I don't have any empathy or whatever - sure, I can hardly deal with my own emotions without having to deal with other people's too - but my twisted personality is at least ideal for puncturing such pretensions - maybe that's why I was born, or at least allowed to live this long.

So he typed back: 'Getting banned isn't the worst thing that could happen for posting that.' And waited.



He had watched a whole episode of Job Interview Girl by the time he got a response.

‘This guy’s right. Cultists can’t post openly on here but that doesn’t mean they don’t use the internet. There’s gotta be at least one of them monitoring each of these threads, probably one for each major sect, and who knows about lone wolves. And it’s possible to run magic through the web too. My friend in magic academy who was working for the Inquisition on his grad project - well, I shouldn’t even have mentioned that much, but you get that I know what I’m talking about.’

This one sparked a flurry of attention.

‘oh h-hi cultist-kun, I didn’t know you were there’ (picture of a furiously blushing anime girl hiding a notebook)

‘Sure, and some of them spread bullshit rumours to make you think they’re watching you when you masturbate.’

‘The cultist reading this’ (moderately memetic gif of a gargoyle spewing shit-filled sewage at such high pressure its head explodes)

‘Only the Ecclesiast is watching you when you masturbate.’





(hi anon's totally real friend in the Inquisition)'

'was that the first thing in your folder faggot? our Dark homies deserve the best' (gif of an erect penis being rap- idly skinned)

'was your friend in the Inquisition also your girlfriend in middle school who let you do anal?'

(ASCII of a man gaping his asshole under a banner read- ing W E L C O M E D A R K C U L T I S T S

E N J O Y O U R S I T E V E R Y M U C H !)

(picture of a noose) 'I'm not sure who needs this more, OP for being a LARPfag or any cultfags who are actually reading this'

'Did you see the thread on the paranormal board about the ARG that looked like a real Dark recruitment operation, and people would disappear if they tried to report these ARG sites?'

Luskonnig zeroed in and from there on filtered out all other responses.

'...wouldn't that...also be part of the ARG?'



The anon had posted it like that wasn't obvious, so - he assumed - some effort had at least been put into making it not obvious, which was to say it sounded like a well-crafted ARG. Better than the ridiculous one people are playing in their real lives.

ARGs had a certain appeal to Luskonnig because they seemed to represent... In Shunny Naïjda's Hell Harrowing, one of the greatest anime of all time and a strong contender for Luskonnig's personal favourite (though he had four or five, always rotating), the lost souls journey to the bottom of Hell to escape it. Below all the grotesquely original tortures and demons of the first twenty-three episodes, they find a spiral stair that goes on and on, totally unlit (originally this was to cut costs) but simple enough you can descend it in pitch blackness, they voyage down it in absolute silence until they lose track of how long they have been in it, and even - in episode twenty-five - begin to lose all sense of space, imagining labyrinths of blind stone around them every time they let go of its walls (the staircase is fairly wide), imagining each other lost forever when they let go of each other's hands, Kamidzu lost forever on a hopeless mission back up the stairs to find one he believed had fallen behind - and at last when they reach the very bottom of Hell, it opens in the sky above the



real world, and they drop from the sky, just like Azamiel, the demon who had fallen on top of the show's iconic cowardly and reluctant hero Astig in the first episode.

There was a certain feeling of vertiginous descent into a conspiracy theory or an ARG, a deliberate heightening of all the normal characteristics of exploring online "database space": the fractal expansion of maps of intangible details, the falling away of the physical world around you, the vertigo of the screen in the dark room, the thrills of uncanny juxtapositions and connections possible only in pure information unmediated by physicality, the sense of literal tunnelling depth to its glow, the unravelling continuity of consciousness and unconscious and world. And yet its promise - even if you don't believe it, you feel it - is that if you go deep enough into this hell, this bottomless pit, you will come out the other side, you will find something that connects back to the real world, an opening onto it you didn't have back when you didn't understand the conspiracies of its worm-eaten obverse. Some knowledge valuable not only out in the virtual world but out there.

Everyone knew, of course, that the internet was the last place to find a conspiracy. Everything was monitored.



Spies, criminals, heretical theologians, Dark cultists, even avant-garde artists recruited IRL, in secluded library stacks, sleazy clubs, streets at night. There was nowhere safer than in your room on a computer. But it wasn't impossible to suspend your disbelief. Especially since this latest attack, the tension of this so-called Dark War on Terror had been rising to such a fever pitch that inevitably, at some point, it would reach even them, wouldn't it? They couldn't stay safe in their rooms forever?

Luskonnig hit 'New Tab' and typed in the url for /x/ - Paranormal.

The threads here on the attack, he was soon kicking himself for not anticipating, were far better than on /b/. The conspiracy theories were less censored, because they were more unhinged. The government or the Ecclesiastix weren't threatened by anyone claiming the layout of magic damage in a blurry photo of the site matched the sigil for a fictional demon prince from a Second Era romance. And yet that seemed as plausible somehow as anything anyone was saying on the main board. The 'paranormal' was what magic itself had once been understood as before the Ecclesiastix had systematized its study, extracted and catalogued and exposed (within its own strict hierarchy of in-





formation dissemination) all the jealously-guarded secrets of the masters and sects, living and, as far as they could manage, dead. Much of Dark magic, of course, had escaped their survey, and while outright speculation about Dark magic as defined in the Index Librorum Prohibitorum was of course as banned on /x/ as anywhere else, if not more so, the known and unknown unknowns discussed there seemed to inhabit the same mists as it.

But no-one in the thread was mentioning any ARG.

He tried wordsearching 'website'. All he found was debates about the legitimacy of news websites giving details about the attack, and a mention of an article speculating about the type of spell used being hosted on an expert's personal website.

Maybe the people investigating really did disappear.

No longer looking for anything particularly specific, nor motivated to go back to the thread about the attack which had already been boring him, he went back to the archive and scrolled.

He let his eyes glaze over the icons, not even identifying most of them, and settle naturally on... a pair of yellow



eyes in a black masked face, staring at him with an unsettling fixity.

Elphantom?

He would have expected that on /In/ - Light Novels. Discussion had to be heated following this incident, but what was Elphantom doing on /x/? Had someone revived the Elphantom Code controversy again or something?

Luskonnig was only moderately familiar with the sprawling franchise. He had seen the most famous animated movie adaptation, but only because its director was a legend in his own right, and read a couple of the novels as a kid when someone had smuggled them into a school library, but as an adult the “where to start” charts were too labyrinthine and daunting, and the whole thing either appealed to edgelords or fangirls, as he understood it. Plus it kept the awkward conversations with parents away.

As controversial as it was popular, and frequently embroiled in battles with the censors, the gory and melodramatic Elphantom light novels portrayed a charismatic, handsome, virtually superhuman and ostentatiously insane Dark terrorist known only by his titular moniker. Though a series of cunning detectives pursued him and



usually acted as perspective characters, everyone understood Elphantom was the real main character of the series. His elaborate plans, immaculate disguises, and shocking acts of violence captured reader interest more than the detectives' own battles and deductions, and more often than not he won, leaving a trail of graphic and unpunished carnage previously unheard of outside of illegal pulps. As a commentary on actual terrorism like the recent attack, it was laughably shallow. Elphantom's motives were safely distant from any real Dark ideologies: much of his appeal was that he seemed driven solely by a kind of romantic nihilism, rooted in a convoluted backstory Luskonnig had never bothered to look into (it had been retconned several times anyway).

Despite his disinterest in the franchise, the character was somehow evocative here, beckoning him deeper into that hell he could feel himself loitering the edges of. He opened a new tab.

His heart started beating faster as he skimmed the spaced lines of the OP. Its third was an URL. The thread wasn't about Elphantom, but about a deleted Elphantom website that had been posted in screenshots on /ln/ and nobody had seemed to recognize or remember. After a few threads



/In/ crossposters had started showing up on /x/, talking about their strange experiences after using the site. One claimed a flaming skull, like that of the ambassador murdered by Elphantom in Elphantom in the Clocktower, had appeared in her closet. She had uploaded a photo which several successive /x/ threads had finally managed to prove was fake.

‘We got tricked by a bunch of worthless chuuni kids from /In/,’ the OP complained, ‘and some of you faggots are trolling yourselves for them and claiming they were actually being controlled by dark magic to make us look like clowns. What’s happened to this board?’

‘Nice reverse psychology OP, you’re not trying to start a general but you put the link in your post. Right. Who is shilling this so hard again?’

‘seer, is that you?’

This was referring, Luskonnig quickly gathered, to the supposed author of the website, seerintheflight.com.

What a chuuni name, he thought. Exactly the kind of thing an Elphantom fan would come up with. But there was, too quick for any self-awareness to intercept, a feel-



ing that only word-combinations like that stirred in him, a kind of flitting chill, almost physical and yet more real and mysterious than any of the mere interoceptions he could reduce most emotional states to if he didn't distract himself from them.

The next page or so was solid shitposting; Luskonnig let himself sink into his usual numb rhythm before he was jolted again: 'Guys I checked registration records. This site never existed.'

'That's it, this is an ARG.'

'nobody's found any of the usual ARG stuff, right? no messages in the image code or anything'

Negative. Luskonnig felt that thrill again. ARGs relied way too much on things like that, to the point that you could pretty much assume nothing real would. If somebody wanted people to suspend disbelief, they'd have to get more creative than that.

But for that matter -

Hadn't he just been looking for this? And to just stumble on it like this, in the catalog... without any sign, nothing in

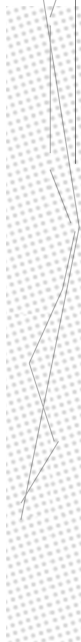


the thumbnail had made this look relevant, he had given up, and yet it had drawn him somehow...

...was this the thrill of the first good ARG in a while? Or of real life, real chaos, breaking through his invisible walls to swallow him?

He skimmed the thread until he could find an image file of the original screenshots.

Most of it just looked like any old Web 1.0 fansite. (There were none of the ARG clichés like mysterious symbols, numbers, counters, or Creepy Image Thread images.) A page of fanart, drawn by someone with clearly above-average skills and grasp of composition, proportion, and other theoretical/formal dimensions of art, but not putting in enough time and effort to really make use of them. There were also long and kind of autistic-looking text posts, like ‘Elphantom is a Philosophical Novel’, ‘Literary Influences in Elphantom’, ‘Does the Phantom Killer Have an Endgame?’ (Nothing obviously spooky or occult like the Elphantom Code or its connection to Dark magic or anything like that.) A long analysis on Elphantom’s motives particularly caught his eye:





'Nobody's happy with Elphantom's motivation because nobody understands it. Realist philistines think a radical ideologue should actually believe in his ideology instead of being given an excuse by the author so he doesn't have to think about it, although the Dark has never had a coherent ideology and if you ask any of these guys to define or explain it, they'll give some embarrassing oversimplification they read in a newspaper. True edgemasters think it's not dark enough to explain his actions, and he should have some over-the-top convoluted tragedy like in their fanfics, as if anything could ever be symmetrical with all the shit he's done and is going to do. A few of each want him to be a true nihilist or just an unexplained force of evil, as if the former exists and the latter isn't just childish incuriosity. These are the only options that at least try to grapple with the bottomlessness of Elphantom's depravity, his infinite and inexhaustible will to destroy, which seems incommensurable with any finite motivation, but both of them try to dress up lazy black-and-white thinking in self-aware sophistication without actually explaining anything. The only literary, philosophical motivation, the only one that actually explains Elphantom is the one he was given in canon by the author who's spent way more time thinking about these questions than you have - probably long before starting the book. No amount of bad things



in themselves would be bad enough to account for everything Elphantom does, but lost love - not involuntary celibacy, like some people who haven't read the books put it, Elphantom fucks and makes men and women fall in love with him all the time, but lost true love - that's big enough, because it's purely negative, not a finite bad thing but the absence of an infinite good thing. Anyone can accept any amount of bad things if they hope things are going to get better, but nothing is going to get better for Elphantom no matter what he accepts, because he's seen the best thing he could possibly have and he can't have it. It is even, in a more serious sense than any of the 'ideology' fags want, a religious motivation: he was almost allowed a life in perfect accordance with Order, did everything in his power for it, and was mercilessly denied it by an Order too high-level for him to process, Time. So he becomes a believer in pure Chaos, either because it can be unconditionally at one with itself, or because it won't desire any such thing; the fine theological detail isn't the point. He doesn't even have to believe, he is consigned to it. He is Time's, and thus Order's, sacrificial victim.'

Time? This, Luskonnig had to assume, had something to



do with the specifics of Elphantom's 'lost love' backstory (he did remember this being the backstory now, and part of the reason he'd never been sold on the series) that he still felt somehow silly looking up.

'He has lost the thing - the Hope - that makes him human. I don't mean this in the sense that he has just given up on or stopped hoping, the way the realist philistines mean when they say, well, why doesn't he just download a dating app, try again, there are plenty of fish in the sea?' I have to assume people who say shit like this are not aware of the implications of what they're saying, or I'd be really edgy and walking around thinking they're living dead who have already lost their humanity. If you tell someone they should keep looking and hold on to that hope, that implies that it does exist out there somewhere and they can find it, even if they die or stop looking before they do. Most people even do this, most won't even really look for it because the knowledge that it could exist is enough for them to go on, and that's fine, better not to lose it like Elphantom does. But Elphantom knows, doesn't just believe, doesn't just hope, because he actually had it. He knew what it was like, and then lost it, and for him to go back out there and say it's just interchangeable with any old relationship, like he has dozens of in the books, would actually be giving



up, telling himself it doesn't exist. Obviously this doesn't happen to most people who break up with their girlfriends or whatever, it probably hasn't happened to you, but it happened to Elphantom because it was written that way because the author wanted him to rebel against the Goddess and become the person he did.'

(reaction image of a woodcut of a man with his head in his hands from a famous old deck of fortunetelling cards)
'Fuck fuck fuck bros, I'm feeling it, I lost it all. Should I go Dork?'

Begging for the ban huh.

'you're never gonna do cool stuff like Elphantom, just gay shit like taking out the power grid for a few days. there's easier ways to be a pain in the ass, like posting these shit threads'

None of it even close to applied to Luskonnig, someone who had never so much as gone on what he would consider a real date. Not only was he a hand-holdless virgin who had barely made eye contact with a woman since the first year of high school, he hadn't had much in the way of real





crushes, even obsessive unrealistic ones the way people like him tended to. There had been a couple of years when he had almost constantly, until he had put two and two together and realized something almost exactly what this writer seemed to be saying, and retreated in order to keep the 'hope' eternally as far away and abstract as possible, too abstract to lose. But it bothered him somehow.

The idea that regret could be the cruellest thing in the world, more than any pain... he had derived the same belief from a completely different pop cultural source. Damn, I wouldn't have minded a chance to pick this guy's brain if he was still online.

Wait, he? You're talking about an Elphantom fan, who's particularly obsessed with justifying his romantic backstory here. What makes you think this was a man?

Huh... a girl who does competent analysis about female otaku stuff that's enough to sell me on a series I had no appreciation of before... and you start chatting back and forth on the internet... that's certainly one way to finally get a girlfriend, Luskonnig...

...and cool fan art. And this whole site has something of a restrained, dark aesthetic that's a bit less obnoxious than the



usual chuuni from these types... she probably has nothing in common with the rest of the fandom, which she's complaining about in half of these posts.

Guys who read Elphantom who aren't literal Dark cultists or gibbering nutcases probably hit on her all the time, but they're all douchebags who smoke too much and wear fake monastic chains and date like three or four edgy girls on the side, there is like a type and she must despise them...

I can almost picture her. Like, the way she draws everyone's hair in this art, the very discrete and tapering way it hangs down, that must be how her own hair works, this style looks like she didn't learn from a book but by copying from life, after all... Clothing, makeup, all of it, you can deduce from the sensibility of the website: like you said, dark and restrained... nobody's that perfectly lined up with their aesthetic though (Goddess knows I'd be a cute girl), maybe she's like fat or something. Hmmm, just a bit squishy, like that kind of soft, puni plush body that she doesn't appreciate because her own aesthetic calls for a certain emaciated regal grace, but that appeals to a moe fan such as myself, especially insofar as it establishes a 'gap moe' with her personality...

You know, if he's a guy he might be hot too. Luskonnig had seen too much of every possible genre of porn to hold





onto his heterosexuality. Maybe a crossdresser? Maybe Xgender? Now we're getting ahead of ourselves...

He rolled over to hit the lightswitch in one fluid motion, his pillow and baroquely contorted sheets now lit only by the romantic flicker of the computer screen. Shrugging his already-open shirt back off his shoulders, he slid one tense hand deliberately, as if drawing a sword, down the middle of his pants.

He looked at his forearm suspended over the shadow between his hipbones. This pale, skinny body, which I've always been ashamed of, on the other hand, maybe she'd find elegant, refined. He imagined them drawing him naked - him naked, their velvet shirt slipping partly off their shoulder as they eyed him up and down - them naked too, but forbidding him to touch them with the tip of their non-drawing finger. The chiaroscuro on the paper taking on almost ecclesiastical arches.

Them reaching out to stroke him with one hand and drawing him with the other...

(Moody blue-grey light dappled with sunset orange seeped through the irregularities in the closed blinds. He hadn't even noticed what the weather had been since he had wo-



ken up, six hours ago, the lights still on as they had been all night.)

‘You know if this site got taken down it was probably by the cops. There’s no smoking guns here but this definitely could be read as Dark-sympathizing stuff, especially now. Even if this is all fake and an ARG you’re playing a dangerous game.’

Oh no, Luskonnig, you’re not becoming one of those, are you? He shuddered at the words - so offensive they were rarely used even on the chans - ‘Dark chaser’.

‘Dude, by that standard half the posts in every Elphantom general on /In/ must be Dark-sympathizing. Fucking concern trolls have been out of hand since the incident, spare us.’

He turned his head over to argue with his visualization of her, who was pressing into his shoulder.

Hey hold on. Isn’t it a weird coincidence that you were just reading a post about the dilemma of having a lover torn away from you by Time, and now fantasizing about a perfect relationship with someone you’ll never meet because their site doesn’t exist, and you’re only aware of it in the form of screencaps?



The bottom dropped out of his stomach. Like he had just been blown open by a cannonball. There was a deeper pit of hell here, the kind he had never dared to venture down, the kind with dizzying gulfs between steps.

Why did I... click on this... again?

He desperately tried to remember some previous thing he had clicked on or even dwelt on before this - or some evidence, even subconscious, that this was the ARG he was looking for and that finding it hadn't simply been a coincidence - one connecting his actions not only to the possibility of Dark magic coursing through his computer, but to the content of the website itself - the idea of being denied a perfect love.

Calm down. This isn't a real love you had and lost, like Elphantom, it's one you're imagining. Anything you imagine can be perfect right?

Usually he'd settle for comfort, or affirmation, or arousal, or whatever else recognizable a fantasy like that could give him. He hadn't tried to fantasize about love in... it couldn't be years, could it?

Man, you have a fucking waifu. You sound like a cheating



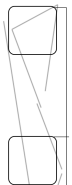
husband right now, you know?

Smilia he had felt this way about, yes. The way he had known from her first scene - no, the moment he read her character Wiki before watching the show, because he had always done that as a kid and despite trying to wean himself off it later in his adolescence, slid back into doing it as an 'adult' to the point that he read more wikis than he watched shows - that the fantasy of her would be perfect and... inexhaustible. Moe at first sight.

That's not a comforting thought. You weren't even supposed to be able to have feelings for a 3D person like you do for Smilia - her designer said outright that was his intention! When he had still allowed himself to dream of real life relationships, he had assumed there would be some other definition of love for them he'd have to settle for and learn to appreciate for its own beauty. Separate magisteria.

Does this even count as a 3D person, though? It's words on a page. You don't even know what they look like. You don't even know if they're real or made up for some elaborate ARG.

And you've only been thinking about them for... five minutes?





You haven't even come yet. Focus on that, jackass.

But the theory had already formed in his mind, and roared in like a train to fill the hollow left when he all the heat and tension in his body were spilled over his stomach.

Maybe this is the curse. Maybe they recruit people to the Dark through the internet by magically making them feel an impossibly perfect love, breaking their hearts, and making them hate existence.

Although, since it's me, I wouldn't have the balls to become a terrorist even if I wanted to. So I'll probably be a failed candidate and just kill myself.

(Why do people not talk about "Failed Candidate" being a trope?)

Maybe the Seer In The Half Light would.)

(It had occurred to him, of course, that he might not be as scared of things if he didn't care about any of them. But if that was the case, he would be all right now. He barely cared about anything any more. But even when he did something with real, material consequences and expected the worst outcome, anticipated it, there was something



like an invisible wall that he ran up against when he tried to realize that destiny. A stutter in his spirit. No more or less than a purely abstract failure-compulsion. Repetition-compulsion. Stop hitting yourself. Stop hitting yourself.)

But - you're not in Elphantom's position yet, are you? You haven't been rejected and they're not dead. The 'hope' still exists out there. Absurdly minute, but the point was that even an absurdly minute hope isn't the total absence of it, right? The point of the Seer's blog post - the point of your living this way - which was which again? Maybe one day, when you figure out how to crawl out of here, you'll make up for lost time and travel the world or whatever, and at some bar in a faraway country under a rose quartz sunset, you'll strike up a conversation with some dark stranger about Elphantom, and bring up the unique interpretation you saw years ago on a deleted website, and they'll say -

Ha ha. He couldn't even joke about that.

The 'hope' that he'd ever leave this place, for more than a brief excursion like during the outage, didn't even count as a 'hope' any more. Death stood between him and the outside world. If he could force himself into the outside





world longer than - than he had during the outage - he could, and would, force himself to die first. The 'hope' that his life, his humanity had hung on for the past year - more? - was that he could have a life he wouldn't regret on his own, that everything that would be worth anything to him out there he could, theoretically - even though he probably wouldn't - have in here.

If he were to fall in love with a real person, if that were to become essential to his 'hope', his happiness, there would be only one way this could hold true: if the person was online, if he could connect to them through the screen, if they could be satisfied being together virtually, or perhaps even they could come visit him, move in with him, look after him.

'Anyone know if this person has any current accounts?' he typed.

The sixteen minutes he did almost nothing but refresh the page - the thread had been old and not very active when he found it - or go to the front page of the board, skim through and refresh that - were agonizing.

'No, nothing attached to the name or anything of the old identity at least, you can see people went looking in this



thread. >>57979896 Even searching keyword combinations from some of these rants. And this was a personal website, not a blog, so we can't track down old friends or anything.'

His stomach plummeted.

Get a hold of yourself. You have no idea if they're anything like you've imagined - you haven't even imagined them that clearly - they're probably some fat annoying girl or they deleted the website because they stopped caring about Elphantom or anything else and got an office job and became a dog mom. Well, they have to be more interesting than the average Elphantom fan but. Would that even make them compatible with you in a relationship? You're not interesting.

And? If that was the proof that sent him into despair? That the perfect person for him - didn't exist?

You can't be having feelings for - just words on a page. They're not even words you care about. You don't even read Elphantom.

What he was reacting to was the image he had formed in his head. The image that was already evaporating as his hands left his dick. That was familiar territory. He knew





how that worked.

Luskonnig fantasized about camgirls - and a few boys - all the time. Constructed entire personalities, manners of speaking, for them, with a commitment he had never been able to attract success in fandom by mustering for an OC. True, compared to this there was usually a speed bump, he had to work himself up more. And he had never come close to anything that felt this close to right since the time he....

He sat up, fell over dramatically on his back and laughed.

It was a wheezing laugh that made his back hurt as his skinny shoulders moved even against the mattress.

If I'm in love with something in my head, that's perfect - then what happened to Elphantom can't happen to me! Right, what they're saying happened to Elphantom can't happen to anyone, this idiot is flat out wrong about everything - and I'll seduce them by proving they're wrong - because I can make... a tulpa!!

A shiver recoiled through him at the moment he thought it. For a long time making a tulpa girlfriend was one of those few things he had held out as too pathetic even for



him. And making one of a real person, not even an anime character... But if this person was right, never finding the one person you can truly love would be more pathetic than even that.

Could he make a tulpa that could write things like that? He couldn't - no, that's not true, I totally could write something like that, he thought. It almost feels... like if I had been a girl, if I had read Elphantom, whatever, like I'd have... like I've written that before.

With that he brought the image into his head again.

Naked, he tried to imagine the body first - suspended in airy blackness as if in some sort of glass tube - his dick distracted him whenever he hovered over the nipples (rich, almost purple) or pubes (just fine enough to see between each black hair) or even something like, the two buttons of collarbone rising rounded from the soft pale neck flesh, the surprisingly large and pillowy eyelids with scraggly scratched-out lashes - the eyes flew open - the experiment was awake - Heheh, what are you doing?

What was the look in those flashing blue-green eyes?

Was she already-





His own were open, and the evening light on the ceiling was hellish flame.

OK, try something simpler. Just picture her sitting in your chair over there, don't lose her, until you can think her all the way over without losing your composure.

God, how often did he even use that chair any more? Sitting up was so uncomfortable. He hated feeling his bones against it - hated thinking of his bones.

All he was picturing was a black slouched shadow, like the chair itself cast against the wall. A comforting presence, like the last time his mom had come into his room to try and help him sleep and not gotten mad at him. He could almost see it with his eyes open. Hair hanging down onto shoulders, hoodie clustering in the chair, playing with a pen, tablet moved to the table, a skull -

A what?

The image was completely gone.

He tried to think about how hard he should think about this. He decided to think about it as little as possible. He'd gone down tangents like this before that got unthinkable

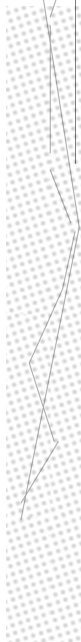


horrifying from an accidental bubble in his brain foam. One of his therapists had told him this, when he'd had a therapist. But how could he try to picture her, and not...?

Just try and think about her again. Maybe not the visual, your imagination always runs away with you, just answer some basic questions about her first, flesh her out. Like:

Is she or is she not interested in Dark magic?

Eww, of course she's not, I couldn't fall in love with a cultfag, and yet - the person who wrote this clearly took this stuff seriously, wouldn't be as endearing if they didn't. And the person in his head wasn't the kind of person to take an idea seriously and hold back from following it somewhere scary or even disgusting because society wouldn't let her; wasn't like him, in that sense. She couldn't fall in love with him if she was - falling in love with a smelly dirtbag otaku who constructed a tulpa of you in his head because of a blog post was just as pathetic as getting into Dark magic because of a light novel. And if she was the kind of person to understand him the way he wanted her to, and too scared to even dabble in something like that, she'd be just like him too; she wouldn't leave her room or talk to anybody, even in his head....





Argh! What's the point of a tulpa if you're going to talk your self into logic traps like this?

"But that's the point of love," came her voice in his head, "that's why you can lose it absolutely and lose your entire world and the Goddess with it, there are conditions and necessities, in human laws. You can't pick and choose a headcanon. Do you want it or don't you? And of course if you don't..."

He closed his eyes. Hers flared blue. And now - he was thinking of it because he was trying not to think about it, he knew, it wasn't any more vivid than an average intrusive thought, but it was there, he couldn't shake it - the skull's. Blue, flaming, a particularly vivid white flame flickering around its teeth like a tongue.

Hey, didn't you start this because you were worried about a curse?

No, thinking back on it little more than a minute (really? it felt like an hour - but the computer clock said - that happened, sometimes) later, that reasoning hadn't made any sense, no one but a god had that kind of magic power, and the Goddess and the Serpent didn't do things like that. God damn it you fucking idiot how do you think of these things you better not get yourself scared shitless about a



curse now.

You better not get cursed now, you mean.

He lay back, totally stiff. When he felt paralyzed like this he liked to paralyze his body, holding himself as still as humanly possible until he broke and did something.

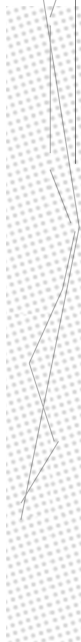
He thought about his skeleton, perfectly still, and thought he heard a wordless whispering from inside himself.

He sat up bolt upright, tried to scroll through the rest of the thread to bring himself back, found his eyes glazing over, and clicked over to /ma/.

Luskonnig knew nothing beyond a high school level about magic - and barely the last two or three years of that. /ma/ was one of the few large boards he almost never went on. But it occurred to him - if anyone knew anything about the possibility of transmitting curses through the internet, they would be there.

He opened another tab.

First, to not look like the complete newfag he was, he





opened the archive and tried a few basic keyword combinations. He had soon spent half an hour reading a year back through threads that affirmed, with almost suspicious regularity, that cursing through the internet was impossible, and in which magic users swapped stories about how they'd had to educate their gullible family members and friends who had fallen for hoaxes in chain emails, about how the Censorship Board should expand the definition of or devote more resources to cracking down on (legal term) "miseducation".

And then there would be, in each thread, the occasional comment stepping back and reasserting that for any newfags reading, your first year textbook wasn't wrong, from a general, theoretical perspective, it wasn't impossible, any relationship between two objects involving a reciprocal regularity of action or state (Zagrew's Law) could act as the vector for any kind of spell, and this included other spells (which the internet was) provided they compensated for magic bleed. The issue was that the internet's massive complexity and distribution made the magic bleed enormous and prohibitively costly to cancel out; the sheer number of magic users, including highly trained security specialists, maintaining it made it easy to notice and intercept even if one somehow did, and they could do it



from anywhere.

It was very much like the difference in difficulty between Dark cultists attacking a temple and simply taking out the power grid across a large area (and hijacking some of the finely tuned weather spells, but those were maintained by a smaller number of specialists), and distributing a curse through the grid directly to all the thousands of people it served. If something like this had been possible, modern infrastructure would never have been worth the effort of developing in the first place. Any Dark magic user who had the power to launch curses through the internet would have had the power to do the latter, and not have needed to resort to the former, so in this particular case, almost designed as an educational example, it was especially absurd to contemplate.

The last time Dark spells had been transmitted through networks like that, in fact, was when the last Dark Lord was active, which was why everyone had to take a half-year survival course in high school anticipating, among other things, the lockdown of all civilian magic networks if the Dark Lord were ever to break free of whatever containment they supposedly had him under.

It was strange that on /ma/, where 90% of threads were so





densely technical Luskonnig could barely read a third of a sentence in, threads on popular and sensational topics like this read in the tone of an instructor on a field trip, speaking to an audience with whom they had no particular rapport or idea of their background familiarity, full of those telling and patronizing omissions like that not even the chain emails these days talked about direct network hijacking but “inexplicitly overlaid” point-to-point spells that defined a small number of targets connected by the internet with a distinct relationship technically non-overlapping with but indirectly influenced by the internet connection (this was the holy grail of the file sharers). He supposed the question was how many lurkers like him were on /ma/ at any given time.

Tulpas, themselves, weren't technically magic - they were purely internal, not based on a relationship between anything and anything else - but there were various magical techniques to realize them to certain extents. These were hard to manage in their own right, of course, and affecting one through the internet would be even harder.

But on some level... the logic was sort of vague to him, but it sounded like the problems solved each other. The extreme mental specificity of a thoughtform made a dis-



tinct target at the other end of the internet connection that could be specified without taking all the complexities of routing into account.

They couldn't have guessed the thoughtform he would create, that he would create one, that... but it all followed from the text, the text had made him do it, it had given him no other option, with inexorable logic.

Surely it had been written for someone out there who would follow that logic through to its conclusion?

Or was there anyone who wouldn't?

He didn't have an idea of how normies with love and fulfillment in their lives would react to a post like that, but he supposed they wouldn't be reading it anyway.

He had imagined it being written as a love letter, a message in a bottle, a cry for help. If it could be any of those things, why couldn't it be a meticulous mental trap, a curse?

Why?

Why did Elphantom do any of the things he did?

Oh God. It explained itself. It all fit too perfectly.





The more he tried to remind himself how little sense it made, the more it made sense.

This has happened before, he reminded himself. And usually you can't make head or tails of it the next day.

That was what his psychologists had told him, before they had given up on him, and vice versa.

So everything's fine, right? Go back to making the egre-
re, a mirror of his face with a big stupid manic inhuman grin, with eyes bulging out of their shadows, said, and he closed his eyes and obeyed, and immediately the skull was there, so real this time he was afraid to try to open his eyes and find they were already open.

It left a blazing blue afterimage on the swimming light on the posters, the crawling shadow on the plaster, the horrible anthill of his senses...

No use. You couldn't even if you wanted to, now. It's an intrusive thought and you're triggering it. You're going to have to get rid of it.

These days he didn't really have any reason to get rid of "intrusive thoughts" when they came to him, 90% of



the time. He could spend an entire day riffing over and over on one, turning it around like a prayer-wheel, like a mantra, until it stopped meaning anything, until it was comforting, until it was arousing. This one was different. Nothing had felt like this in years - the pressure building, the heat of hell inside him, every time he turned it around, not a prayer-wheel but a thumbscrew. Not just the skull, but the original thought, the thought of the text, the thought of who might have written it, the whole curse he had been trying to escape and cursed himself -

She was there too, like an afterimage, a succubus hovering over his shoulders. Beckoning him to lean back, into her arms, and be consumed by whatever -

Intrusive thought. Psychosis. The diagnoses still stuck. He had never been so glad for the snuffy, patronizing voice of the psychiatrist in his head. He had felt like this before. He had only ever found one way of dealing with it. The psychiatrists had never suggested it, or supported it, because it wasn't compatible with the kind of life he was supposed to have.

And who really wanted a life like that, anyway?

Luskonneg minimized the internet window and opened





his music player. He rolled over on one side (away from the phantom arms). He selected his all-instrumental playlist - lyrics could set him off on a rollercoaster of association, interpretation. It was mostly progressive metal, wailing guitars wandering and never resolving over synco-pated bestial heartbeats of synthesized drums. Ten, twenty, thirty-minute soundscapes. They evoked in him some sort of dark landscape, a shadowy but pure landscape of rock and smoke, a planet before life but rich with chaos and order, with fractals that appeared and disappeared. He closed his eyes.

He could stay awake for hours like this, listening, cocooned, wandering. It could take that long, it could take days, but eventually any thought would erode. Any curse. Nothing could touch him without eroding.

And eventually it did. And with the only force that could resist erosion - boredom - scratching at him, he rolled back over and opened the internet again.

He was still on /ma/. The thread about curses hadn't updated, and had locked. He closed the tab and found himself back on /x/. The thread on Seer's website was still



open with nothing but a lonely anonymous “bump” having updated since he had last seen it. So someone else cared about this... did they care in the same way he did? Or had - he couldn't remember the caring - it was buried under layers of grey confused sediment he didn't dare scratch at. Were they cursed too, desperately banging on the door of the thread for someone to free them? (But I don't care, that means it wasn't a curse or love or whatever I thought it was...) He thought of answering, trying to put words around what he had just experienced, dispassionate enough not to awaken it again but just enchanted enough to evoke a frisson, provoke a screencap, become part of some accretion of memories that he fished in the dark waters for on days like this... (He was suddenly aware that the sun would be setting outside. The only window in his apartment was in the kitchen which he barely ever went into - hadn't been in today - and he kept it covered by straitened blinds and a curtain, all electric lights blazing in the main room around him. The first weeks he had lived here the changes of light, particularly the morning and evening, had been overwhelming. The warm colours were like some alchemical fire-water rising from within him, drowning him from the inside, overflowing his eyes in the form of tears. Time itself burning. The outside world he had abandoned flowing in around him, purified of all





distracting forms into a solution of pure being he couldn't touch, sweet lava, suffocating his heart. Every now and then he could still feel it, without the slightest change in his monotonous light, prowling around his carefully warded boundaries like a tiger, strong enough to knock down the walls but content to taunt him.)

It was the thought of someone just like himself a few hours ago on the other side of the connection, longing for someone to understand what he was going through, that triggered the sudden jolt of cruelty that decided for him. Giddily, as if he had just chugged an energy drink, he closed the thread.

Warm in the satisfaction of his impulse, he sat up. He scrolled up and down the catalog of /x/, not reading the threads, barely even registering the images. He rocked back and forth.

It was over.

Wasn't it.

Then as if in equal and opposite reaction a strange foreboding crept up the back of his neck as he let the rhythm of the scroll bar slow, as words began to slip past the blur



of motion.

*"Cross-dimensional contact vs. tulpas: War of the Waifufags:
FINAL EDITION"*

"what's the Darkest thing you can post without getting banned"

*"Let's settle this once and for all, can ghosts haunt computers?
also true haunted computer thread no cypasta"*

*"THE RATS IN THE WALLS THE RATS IN THE WALLS
THE RATS IN THE WALLS THE RATS IN THE WALLS
THE RATS IN THE WALLS THE RATS IN THE WALLS"*

*"stare at this sigil to find out if you're cursed. 98% effective, /
ma/ poster certified"*

The pendulum stopped.

Three voices, almost simultaneously: - You're not actually going to click that, are you? - How would it hurt, if everything's fine? - Dude click it now, that's gonna get deleted in like 30 seconds

He clicked, and expanded the image, and waited.

The sigil, black on white, was a circle with three small triangles pointing downwards beneath it. A small lick of ink





between the circle and the triangles, almost like a single tongue of flame. From the mouth of a skull...

He wanted to click out of the thread- but he was frozen- he needed to wait- needed to see-

The most horrifying face he had ever seen, filling his screen, filling his vision, filling his brain, screaming...

Another long night and this would be the first week in over a year, Luskonneg realized ruefully, that he had been unconscious for more than half of.

Mostly that had been when the internet was out. And then he had knocked himself out freaking out over a jumpscare. Unironically.

The sleeping wasn't the half of it. How was he supposed to recover from this week, even by the precarious standards of his own dignity?

He sighed. It was noon. He wasn't even looking at the clock. The light was the same as always. He just knew it was noon. The cruellest hour, the bluntest, the most comforting. A distant teacher with a switch, a demiurgic god.



He would do what he always did. Go to the one place he had dignity.

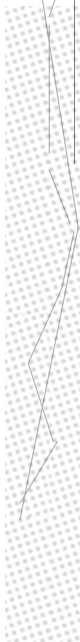
He sighed, and opened Feed.

If nothing else, weeks like this gave him things to think about. To post about. To instruct those half-normie plebeians beginning to descend into the dungeon, the endless tunnels of the abyss he called home.

‘People who are only sexually attracted to 2D like to act like they’re so pure and holy. Dirty 3D is fine for dirty things like sexual fantasies, but what is a 2D girl, a Kleenex to you? 2D girls are for falling in pure love with. Isn’t this like when priests become celibate to show their devotion to the Goddess and then decide to molest kids instead? Guys like me may not be pure enough to give up on sexual desire entirely but at least we keep it where it belongs.’

Of course, this was complete rank hypocrisy on his part, he thought, ruefully looking down at the body pillow next to his head.

He had stained it with cum three times trying to wipe that face - those three faces - from his memory.





Braz frowned. “That take is too hot.” She pointed from the elbow, still pressed against her side as it would be when her arms folded again. “The internet is big now. He could still make friends and enemies, build a following, everything it would take for him to awaken to his destiny on there now, if he starts attracting attention. We can’t get him off it, but we can’t just treat it like last reincarnation when it was just a bunch of eccentric village mages arguing about spells they couldn’t use in greentext. Ban him for a few days.”

The containment officer, stationed at a computer with backdoors to every major social media platform, individual citizens’ computers and the underlying magic framework of the web itself, logged into Feed in admin mode and nonchalantly locked Luskonnig’s account for a reply swearing at a game developer a week and a half ago.

It was a striking day in Crach-Houarnez, capital of C’harn, if not as striking as it would have been anywhere else. Stifflingly dark as if a lid was being closed over the sky and pushily windy, and barely drizzling tantalizing gossamer sheets of rain.



Braz stepped out of the doors at the end of the long steep stone staircase - shining and even its echoes shining - that ran down the tower at the front of the government building which housed the containment office (five floors up) and immediately started hearing the specifically pitched tinnitus indicating a psychic transmission from the Inquisitor.

Without thinking she picked up. Then realized she would have to get somewhere she could focus. She couldn't do that while scanning for a cab or even

I can't hear you here, she thought. It's too busy. Call me back in a few minutes.

She could hear the urgency in his mind.

She ran into the first door she could find leading down to the Underground Harbor.

Mountainous - or rather, terraced - as the rest of the country (known as the Thousand Plateaus) of which it was capital, most of Crach-Houarnez was situated several dozens of meters above the harbour that had for centuries made it the major source of trade flowing into C'harn. When mass-scale magic had grown shipping traffic beyond the





capacities of its natural fjord, the architects of Crach-Houarnez, encouraged by the widespread success of infrastructure projects such as sewage systems, had decided on the nonetheless never-before-attempted solution of blasting long channels for the sea out from under the cliffs. In the busiest places these 'inverse docks' even went below the outside sea level through a series of locks, allowing them to pool up to three layers beneath each other. The largest, most complex and vibrant underground city outside the Anthills of Gnush soon sprang up around them. Where the Crach-Houarnez above ground was stunted, stoney, and at the mercy of stormy skies, the Underground Harbour was a brightly lit, densely decorated phantasmagoria.

Finding her way to where the light soothed her, she sat down in a tiny booth and ordered a ramen, and called the Inquisitor back.

- We interrogated one of the cult leaders. A guy we've had a lead on for a while, although he almost slipped us. The Initiator of the Black Mushroom.

- Those are the ones that are borderline insane, right?

- I'd say that for any Dark Cultist... but no, we're well aware



of the issues around the reliability of an informant like that, but the way I see it that's an asset because we know how he'd lie, and what he told us didn't sound like it. It's also consistent with a few rumours we didn't consider corroborated enough to talk about until now.

So, all the alliances we'd heard about between the different cults were real, but they hadn't been planning this attack together. The whole thing was one guy's idea - someone unaffiliated, whose name has only showed up in the margins of anything until now. They're supposed to be something of a magic specialist, and just about everybody who's mentioned them has been scared of them. The Initiator had been relying on them since the last time we infiltrated Black Mushroom's supply lines to keep their whole recruitment in the clubs under our radar somehow, you know, the thing where they drug people's drinks and give them the command hallucinations... The other cults this person had blackmail over and stuff. They've been setting up something like this for a while, it seems, and had the whole thing planned out to the last detail. They are also the one who developed that spell used in the attack. He paused. They didn't tell anyone how it works, except the ones using it, who they killed.





- *That seems like a bit too much opsec for such a small attack.*
It almost sounds like...

The Inquisitor transmitted the image of himself nodding at the other end of the phone. A test run. That's why we've just made capturing this guy our top priority, over identifying the shapeshifters, breaking up the cult alliances, or any of the things I'd been saying were most likely to become bigger threats. So here's what we know:

They call themselves the Seer in the Half-Light. They wear a magical hooded cloak that looks like storm clouds - as in, the colours move like storm clouds. Underneath it they're supposed to be... very pretty, which is another reason so many cultists hate them. Mid-length black hair. Thin face. They're pretty much always moving around, doing some kind of petty crime or confidence scam to support themselves, but we haven't figured out what since they also mind wipe themselves off records very effectively. Might even be a sex worker. Put your ears to the ground if you hit the brothels, huh? But one place they keep showing up is universities and Ecclesia, probably trying to access or steal advanced magic research.

That whole description sounded like something made up, an otaku's idea of a Dark cultist. A cringey OC, presumably complete with a tragic and tortured past. Like El-



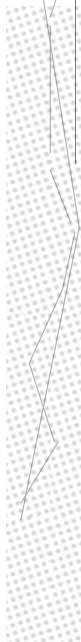
phantom or something. - Anyone hate them enough to co-operate with us going after them?

- *We've created a magic channel for anyone who wants to pass us tips.*

- *What if their allies get in on it?*

- *The security's on the highest level we have because they might get into it, we know they're capable of jumping secure lines. But it sounds like we really don't need to worry about 'allies'. They're acting practically alone, only working with cultists they have direct leverage over. They've fucked with every established power player they've come across. It's not a question of does anyone hate them enough, so much as does anyone not fear them.*

This, too, felt more like fiction than reality. Pop culture made Dark cultists out to be rebels, loners, haters of everyone and everything, but for all their baroque and petty schisms and infighting, most of them were people who desperately wanted to belong somewhere, and fell into their place in whatever facsimile of society the Dark offered them with a devotion few had, even in the government or military, for the real society Braz was part of. And of course they were all ready to subordinate themselves at





a moment's notice to the Dark Lord.

- *Well that's good news. We'll find them somehow, if we keep our noses to the ground and wait.*

It was one thing for a character like that to exist outside of fiction. Apparently they did, but accepting that didn't mean Braz had to accept yet that they could be a threat outside of fiction - that was a step further. They had pulled off one of the most disruptive Dark attacks in a while, but the "while" between those was getting shorter and shorter, and weak groups - and occasionally individuals - got lucky all the time.

That was what Braz's instincts said. But something about this story also felt like Braz's normal instincts didn't apply to it.

She spooled and let down her ramen and let it grow cold as, with the dreamy calm of someone who had long ago killed the living part of her that would vibrate with pain at the mere thought of such a worst-case scenario, she tried to figure out what it was.



2
LWCIGI2I
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2WM
MPECENW2
GILNEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N11V1CE2
23E
2025END1
1B2NM
0N12
V11D4
WVENW
DOTOKE
E1
TUBOVE
M1N1
1WC1D1D0
1EMLOB
E1D2MOD
2ED DO
WE E11
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOTOB
1B2NM
TOWEN





Name: Razina Savelyevna

Birthday: September 26th

Sex: Female

Occupation: Chief Ecosystemic Analyst,
Savannah Staff

Likes: Summer, seaweed dishes, baking, field
survey work, plasticraft, janitors

Dislikes: Micromanagement, unweighted
zones, vinegar, chocolate, theater

Blood type: Ö

Seen with: Of the other senior staff, only
Tacimarsa and Anyndelhataman, and
then only rarely. Keeps to her own staff.

A career practical biologist who has spent a few decades living at Savannah. Central mastermind of Savannah's ecosystem while higher-level directors such as Tacimarsa or Coteshinoeleon have broad control over the primary species featured in the biosphere, an analyst's role is to hack out the details of how those pieces fit together, and how many more pieces are needed. This often extends to any level of modifications; most habitats will result in the engineering of a few entirely novel species from algae

2
LVCIP121
OET
TVCN2
VCCNM20H
HRECEM02
HLEBBV
20HMOD
H202
CEVADU
HILVICS2
22E
2025END1
1120H
0012
00100H
H000H
D000E
E1
T000E
H101
H0C1D1D0
LEMB0V
E102M0D
2E1 D0
H0 E111
H01112C1
10H
COM2EC1E
H0E1
211
D000V
1120H
T000H

to apex predators to “reconcile” the ecosystem into a shape that sustains itself.

Unlike the vast majority of Savannah’s staff, makes a point of taking semiyearly voyages back to Heath proper, always spending time on the way in Kozue: world’s largest city, nearly a billion in population, and seat of Heath Governances central Chanticleer. This comes at great expense, given the infrequency of liner patterns only allowing for routes aligning with favorably close astral configurations. She spends a lot of the time on the road and in hotels, more than anyone else on the staff.



Synopsis

an emissary vessel from the See of Delphi, learned lawyers and messengers of the Sun, descend to the garden habitat of Savannah to uncover the nature of a mysterious project that might change the very key of the song of humanity.





Last Time

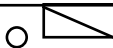
emelry draws up a list of the persons of interest in the workings of savannah, its scientists, planners, propagandists and fugitives, and considers the directions in which their secrets could extend



CW: religion, religious conflict, murder, imprisonment, mass destruction

"The dream of war faded. The people met again in the road, and the last of the sieges were dismantled. The garlands wilted in the windows; the petals fell in the gutters. She left from the port, and before the month ended, returned to the house of jade. Her poets gathered around her, there in the suites of the king. 'For you, my fruits among stones, I bring the tongue of the wolf', she said, and told them what had passed in her meeting with the easter general. But they acted in shock, and shouted, 'Oh speaker! You are tired from the road. Why should we discard the speech of Eden? We would lose ourselves, and our own tongue. Look at our city, how dear she is! Yet, even in peace, the streets of her poor are marked with plague. Do not ask us to do this; we are in mourning.' But she rose, and her expression was grave. 'Was it not you yourselves to thrust the name majesty upon me? Should I be mind and letter, cannot word live between me? If you would speak by my side, I ask you to. But now

Don't be
Rita's fan



I am not Malinali. I am Sofia, and it is in the hour of sunset that I go to them. I must know my brother to know the measure between all men.' The poets fell into argument as she departed to confer with the king. They read what she had left for them, and at last followed her, and her steward, with the night."

Seven-Tenths Testament, Gospel of Yayaxchun, 21:14-25

"Things should be clear by now, but We'll get into it anyway. You are lacking, you are unaccepted, and your song finds no home within humanity's story. Bone unset and festered, We reject you. You've neither refined the expression nor expanded the border, succeeding only in a perverse diminishment of a stunted dream - these creatures are so inhuman that We can but smell the smoke of Dis upon them. Can't you? We speak of irreconcilability.

We have consulted with speaker Perrin Olkha, and per her advice are prepared to uphold the initial sentence of glorification. Staff is free to go at the discretion of Saniasa, but leadership will be returning with Us. Five years' study in the omen's course at Perihelion - fear not, that will be inclusive of travel time, and with no obligation of conversion. We realize this is nonetheless heavy. But Weylbloom itself is heavier still; its poor



*bloody ghosts and grey bloody land. Yes, let sun see this valley:
Let the world you've put in jeopardy see it too. This nightmare
has worn on, and on god We will end it. May the mind and
shape of the spoken lord find mercy for all who have set foot in
this place, and may your victims be remembered as the people
they once were."*

Special Hearing of Weylbloom Summary of Semiryama
Qiyori Sanchez, Mikadit@ Apparent of Delphi

~~~~~

## Record II

relating the course of three initial interrogations, and the  
first suspicions to surface

~~~~~

I was a child the last time I dreamt. It was a strange time
of my life. I was perhaps eight and in the care of my grand-
father, who had recently retired following the death of his

RECORD II



twin. This meant that his time was close, as well. We only spent a scant six years together, yet it seems even now to stretch across the better part of my early, vague memories. Just after the funeral, we met again.

In the dream, we sat together in a lonely tearoom open to the void. A loom lay between us; with one hand he worked the shuttle, and with the other reached towards space, plucked out a star, and drew thick, sparkling threads from it - gingerly, as one would handle a bee.

We worked together. I was learning another pattern, a common one of birds against birds - one flock in the pale gold of starlight, and the other a dim earthy orange, tessellated against the other in flight. He spoke for the whole dream, but I was so enraptured in the movements his hands made in their loops that I scarcely registered a word until I woke.

But that night, after I was visited, I dreamt again.

In fact, I remember the dream better than the night. I scarcely know how I found myself back at Umihotaru - a blur of hurling myself through the corridors until I reached the docks, spilling my story out to Anahit, Kaitei giving me something to sleep. A bruise across my entire



arm from where I had landed too harshly on a wall in my haste - another thing I had not experienced since very young.

Something must have roused a long-atrophied dream-muscle: I dreamt of thick forest and bramble, of moonlight on the skin of fruit, gasping and crashing through the woods. Was it Savannah at night, or an ancient Heath? I couldn't tell, I couldn't think, but I could smell smoke on the wind, and feel holly pricking my legs. My skin felt like leather. I saw only the few feet in front of me, my gaze desperate for details - nothing save the veins of leaves, and the stones on the soles of my feet. It was as if every part of my body was touched at once, by all the smallest fragments of the world.

Bettany rapped hard enough to echo on the bronze bulkhead of the women's quarters, and Anahit stretched and mumbled awake in my arms.

"Up, you two. Didion has fixed us breakfast, and I'd say you need it," and she wandered off.

"Are you feeling well?" Anahit asked when she had gone, pawing sleep from her eyes. "Poor thing. You were shaking terribly, even asleep."



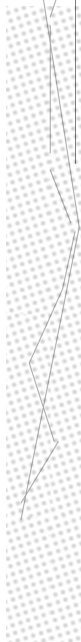
“Better.” I helped us both out of the hammock, and we dressed. A half hour later, and I was out of the door.



The receptor offices were so little removed from the docks that much of the transport piping and railcrane lines extended to the central plazas surrounding the power complex. But aside from the familiar industrial scenery, it was clear that this area was more lived in. It was, as was all of Savannah, empty - but its facades and bustly were welcoming.

I rubbed my eyes. Perhaps they only felt close. I'd been lost in thought on my way here, the kind of worry that passes time blindly, and quick. Bettany had wasted this morning's meeting on breakfast and recuperation, meaning that the full discussion we'd been promised would come after the workday. What a way to prepare. I felt my bruise throb under the ice adhesive.

It was beautiful here. The docks were all utility, just the barest trappings of impression via sleekness and scale, and the hotel-like zones I had visited before still rang uncanny and too-still. But here was built in softcrete, stark and elegant in the Lunic style, dotted with a few patches of gar-





den - complete with the occasional distant, tall figure on a lunch break - and several wall-offices overlooking them. They had clearly built this place to make an impression.

Along the generously open corridor-zone, lines of statuary loomed above the rows of often-alight windows, recalling the colossae of Diadem. The receptor offices stood at the furthest point of the zone, marked by the largest statues by far - a robust Solar oman and a tall silver woman together holding a lantern aloft. Beneath them, behind the windows, a certain serpentine man waved at me from inside the room.

When I entered, he was still hooked by one foot to the backroom doors, his loose white jinbe shifting in the air. "Hi, hello? Sainshand, right?"

"Yes! Emelry Sainshand, crew's lieutenant. I'm here for this morning's interview. I trust you haven't waited long?"

"Long? Whatever. Beckon Bell, but you know that," he frowned. He stretched his nine-foot frame across the room, and held out his hands expectantly. "Your prefect said you'd be bringing the ration papers, too. I'd really like to see those first, it's been a busy day."



"Has it?" I obliged. "Well, I shan't be an imposition. The first rounds will require no more than a half hour of your time."

"Imposition, la! So if you'd been here on time, we'd have finished ages ago." He huffed to himself, was somehow on the opposite side of the room again, and flipped through the pages so brusquely I thought he would tear them. I let him read quietly for a minute, and checked my phone. What in the world had him is such a fuss? I was precisely punctual, I had made sure of it. I prayed last night's visit had not shaken me to the point of interfering with my sense of time!

"What... what is this?" he said at last, still reading.

"I'm sorry? You'll excuse me, I was only asked to deliver these. These matters are outside my role." I blinked. "And, a moment ago, did you mention you had been waiting?"

"Yes," he said, and with one stretch of his legs was next to me again, looking over my shoulder. "Ah! What is happening? Your clock's an hour ahead... and look at this!" He shook one of the papers in my face. "You requested barely a hundredth of what our ration has increased by... really, what? I need to talk to my people about this, can you talk



to yours? I'll be right back."

Just as frantically, he disappeared into the backrooms with a hiss and a flash of light.

I wasted no time in calling Bettany, but there was no response. Was she really so busy, or ignoring me? I called back to the ship instead, and explained the situation to Anahit.

"No... I am not sure..." she said, sine-static whining over the feed as it weakened and stabilized. "She's still not back, but she should still have her phone."

"That's the least of what I'm concerned about... listen, Anahit, has anyone been having issues? I am at the receptor offices now, and there have been a few hiccups."

"Hiccups?" Anahit pressed, instantly interested. "What, has something else strange happened?"

"Oh no, no, nothing... 'off'. It's just that I was late due to a sync malfunction, and they have very different paperwork here than we do. It appears to be crossed wires."

"Well, if you say so. And I guess there've been a few problems, but... ah, paperwork. Didion!" she called away from



the mic, "Emelry wants you... yes. Yes, yes. Alright, he says that he double-checked that one moments before you left."

"Very well. Anahit, incidentally: your scrys, how much power can they draw?"

"Hm? Well, not much at all. We've set up a yet larger view today, but it's not more intensive than one of the idle workstations."

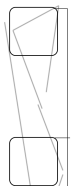
"I see. And the system issues you mentioned?"

"I guess our archives are running a bit slow. File transfer time's at a few minutes, we've been doing a lot of that today... but I might be imagining it. Ha, wouldn't it be a relief? When little things go wrong, it feels almost normal being here..."

I thanked her, let her know I'd be delayed in returning to the ship, and had only a moment to hang up and look out the waiting-room windows before Beckon was back.

A flash of golden, honeyed light hit the glass before me. By the time I turned to face him, the door was closed again, and the atrium was a few degrees warmer.

"Lieutenant? Any news?"





"I've spoken to my crew. There may be a few technical issues today, but we can assure you our copies of the forms are correct. I don't believe there is any situation where a ship of our make would need anywhere near that level of power."

"Right. La, well... yes, the interview. Please, if you'd come inside..."

He opened the door, and from it burst a golden, hazy light so thick that it was almost liquid. I squinted, but my eyes quickly adjusted. I smiled. "Thank you very much."



The inner receptor offices were arranged in rings around the sunshaft for easy observation - why, I couldn't imagine. Nothing was visible but the light; even from behind the feet of shieldglass it shone strong enough to sting one's eyes. Especially mine. He selected one of many cooler and dimmer conference rooms, and showed me to my perch as a fellow lunic staff member drifted past our door, glancing in curiously. I waved politely.

Beckon was in his fifties. I'd still had a mental image of that young man in his files, the intern he was upon arrival



to the skeleton of Savannah. He was not old by any means, still strong and healthy. His face was gentle, creased with soft smile-lines, and a thick braid still ran down half his length. All that truly aged him was his limbs. Even today, the gradual thinning of his species' already-hollow bones was a fact of life, and I knew he was delicate despite his vigor. His arms were perhaps as thick as mine. I watched him bustle about a corner kitchenette.

"Is this your office?" I asked, scanning around the walls - black, cushioned marble. A watercolor portrait of a young-er Coteschinoeleon was fastened to one of them, between two vases of blue tulips embedded in the wall.

"A home away from home," he said airily. "No, it's not my main one. Just the one I use when they call me in for the big projects, or emergencies like these. Why do you ask? Here, your tea - white berry."

"Thank you." He passed the bag across the room and I caught it, still pleasantly hot in my hands. "Oh, the plants, and pictures, I meant. It seems relaxing."

"My staff has taste," he said. He finished in the kitchenette and perched across from me, clamping an orange teatray to the table between us. "Speaking of, may I offer? I



still feel terrible for snapping at you... We're all on edge from... all of this. I'm so worn out."

"What, you as well?"

"Ha! Trouble sleeping, you mean? I figured that if anyone would be getting rest during the audit, it'd be your team."

"I don't mean to disappoint," I smiled. "It's a long way through the void, isn't it? Tell me, sel Nine Leaves, does one ever adjust to the day cycle?"

He laughed, again - how was this the same man I had met at the door? "No, I don't think you ever do. Gave up on trying to keep my cycles in check a long, long time ago. And please - just Beckon is fine. About time to begin, wouldn't you say? I'll take that now."

"Take?"

"Your lie detector. If you would."

"Ah! Yes, yes, of course." I rummaged in my bag for it, and quickly found the inlaid case it resided in. I carefully undid the clasp, and lifted it from its cushion. "Here you are, it affixes to the ajna, and -"



He had it on, and properly too, before I could explain - it lay like a dark jewel on his brow.

“You’re familiar with the tool.”

He gave an aching and tired smile. He was quiet for a moment, busying himself fiddling with his own bag of tea.

“Yes. Listen, now we’re on record, and I can guess what you’ll ask. So let’s talk about the name.”

The air was quiet but for the distant hum of sunlight. I met his eyes, glinting in the golden light.

“Yes. I’ll be frank, your... situation is unique. I’ve read what is available. But, ‘Pearl Wall’... those of your husband’s family are not commonly seen outside the capital.”

“Very reasonable,” he assured me. “I mean, what are these ex-HR guys doing out here? But please don’t worry. We’ll explain everything, you’ll always have complete cooperation.”

“It’s been hard not to wonder. Then, tell me what you’d have us believe.”

“Well, what do you know? You said ‘what’s available’, but I



imagine we're working with different sources."

"That it happened a long time ago." I fanned my tea. "And that the Board has no love left for you. They are guarded about their private affairs, and bear the power to keep them guarded - not so, for most others. I've never suspected you, sel Nine Leaves, of anything - I only hoped you'd be forthcoming about what your exilors want to hide of you."

He grinned at that. "Well, alright. I won't disappoint you. But first, while we're talking about the name... Sever does still keep the name on all his paperwork here, you've probably read it. It's out of pride, and when you speak to him you'd better call him by it. But you understand, by Hightower law at least, we don't have the right. As far as they're concerned, we're both a 'cal Savannah' - I don't know how much that means to you."

"An emphatic disownment. Certainly a strong, and dramatic gesture."

"The Board is dramatic, and Pearl Wall perhaps the most so of its families. It... look, you know this, it is a bad place filled with bad people. And his sister has always been especially unstable. They were never close. He was close to



their mother, but Cure was... sorry, let me think.”

“It’s quite alright. Take your time.”

“La, don’t mistake this for emotion! It’s been a very long time. I’m only trying to pick the right words to describe her in the first place. Feather Cure is one of those people whose entire mind is nothing but ruthless political instinct, you understand? She killed their mother outright, for a quicker inheritance of her seat on the Board. Officially, it was old age, but these set-family circles... everyone knew. Everyone. But only Sever had the courage or care to bring it to the Novarian courts, and you can guess how that went.”

“Ah. And this was before Mountain Rain took office, correct?”

“Yes. Shale Heart was still Chair, it was another few years before she retired. For as long as the Board was hers, there was this whole... climate of vitriolic misandry. Especially bad in the courts, and this with Sever! He’s always been an eccentric, and it’s easy for people to twist that. But oh, he argued wonderfully silver. When the trial was over, and she was exonerated, Cure went on a purge. Anyone close to Sever, from their own family or from any of their vassal



houses - like mine - was done away with. No more deaths, but some jailings, and a few bad months before Cote made the offer and we caught a liner. And that, lieutenant, is the story.”

I finished my current round of notes. “Hightower maintains jails?”

“Quietly. There’s always been one in Dear Diadem, and I believe a Near Victory one opened, too. Nothing in Needle, if you’re worried. Listen, could I ask you a favor?”

“I will hear it, but “

“Would you be kind with him, when you two do speak? At least give him warning, if you can. I don’t think he’ll handle your meeting well.”

“Why not?”

“Well, he is eccentric, after all. Strong opinions. But more so,” he tapped his forehead and smiled, “these. You understand? Leaving Lune was not easy. You’re right to be suspicious of human resources. The neotenes they employ aren’t quite as gentle as your law crews when they have questions to ask.”



“As we are well aware...” I gave my own tired smile. “But I can commit to that. Thank you for sharing this.”

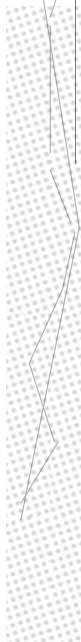
“Of course! But, let’s get out of this gloom a bit, I assume that’s what you came for. Any other, happier questions for me? Looks like time will be coming up soon.”

He was right, we’d been talking for over twenty minutes. I took a deep breath. “I can do that. I’ve been curious, Beckon: where do you live? I’ve seen so little of this habitat. So much of it seems entirely unused, so I have wondered where your staff spend their lives.”

“Ah, don’t be too surprised. This is a Triactis installation in the end, so children weren’t in the contract for any of us - even the incubators here are emergency-only. Not the best conditions for a true city forming. But one will, one will in time - we built it empty, but it won’t stay that way.”

“How involved were you, during the construction process?”

He chuckled. “Not very. By the time we arrive they were done with initial construction. It didn’t mean much. The core hull is still Triactis-made, with help from the major outer cities. La, however it was made, it looked cobbled-to-





gether when we got here. Sever was technically brought in for the design process alone, but we ended up having to cover for a lot of earlier mistakes. It's a shame that Savannah isn't Hightower-quality," he said, "but it wouldn't exist if it was."

"And you were involved in this repair?"

"Try 'revision'. I was just a normal staff member then, but I suppose I came up on it. Oh, but you asked about housing - we live further down the cap, at the level where lunic gravity sets in. Very convenient. There's a little community down there; can't be more than a few blocks cube, but still homey. That's just kind of how things are here. Hell, most of the heathlings here live on the landscape itself."

"Oh? That's quite the news to me."

"Ha! You mean Anyndel isn't showing off the valleys in his brochure? But they're so picturesque! He has no eye for the manmade elements of his own vistas! Oh well, I'll find my own picture." He scrolled through his phone, and mine pinged. He'd sent me a photo - a few buildings on top of the ground that heavily resembled the caps' design ethos, but more used and handmade. A greenhouse here, a warehouse there, a clock tower. Behind and above them



all, stretching far beyond view, was the sheer flat cliff of the cap, painted in orange, yellow, green stripes - each as broad as Umihotaru - running from the surface of the landscape to where we were now.

"Isn't it something? Just wait til you see it in person, la. These days, it's about all that can make me miss the highlands."

"Fascinating. I was under the impression the surface was pristine."

"Well, most of it is. The valleys are the only exception, but it's never been my field. Hm... I heard a rumor. Dr. Savelyevna is on your list, no?"

I sharply turned my eyes back to him. "Actually, we've already had chance to meet."

He scoffed, still genial. "Here I was thinking I was your first interview."

"Oh, don't mistake me, you are. It was chance. I unfortunately haven't had the pleasure of speaking to her at length..." Which she had certainly made sure of.

"You got a little lucky. She doesn't usually make it all the



way up here, usually too busy with her... whatever she's up to in town. These days."

"I'm sorry, on the landscape itself? Not that same town?" I asked. So, try to scare me off from your territory, Savelyev-na? Part of me wished I hadn't met her so soon.

"Yes, why do you think I've shown you?" He drummed his fingers against the table. "They all moved down a few years ago. Haven't worked directly with her since, whatever she's doing now... but, la, would you look here! I believe that's all for our time," he said, with a cheer that made it clear - politely, but firmly - that we were done.

I held the door for him as we left, and the still air of the conference room seeped out with us. There was a constant crackling buzz when next to the shaft that made it feel as if we were breathing cotton dust. Even then, it was super-naturally quiet.

Our Umihotaru's sunbeam receptor is a simple thing. It is one of Kaitei's less demanding everyday tasks, requiring only occasional cleaning and realignments - you could even thrust your hand into it, and not burn lest you hold there more than a minute. But here... the scale was incomparable. Several stories of receptor, the attendant offices,



the quarter-mile-wide hole that was Savannah's ultimate central power source. A river of photons packed so thick that it banished the void.

Beckon's full hand was on the glass. We perched at the railing alongside the window as that mighty river of hyper-concentrated sunlight flowed and flowed mere feet from us, and glowed its heavy gold even through the tempered, barely-transparent panels. By any other light but the true light, they would be black.

"It is a sight."

"You never get used to this, either." The sunlight danced in his eyes.

"It is as if I can feel it."

"It's spectacular. Not even an hour ago, this light was still inside the sun. Every time I come in, it's like living a whole day-week at once. It's a special place. Lieutenant..." He was just a touch embarrassed, and spoke slowly. "Silly. But it's not every day I meet a haruspex. Would you consider saying a few words here?"

My face was warm. I nodded, quietly, and let my mind slip





from the perspective of a mere lieutenant - here was a man just as I. We closed our eyes and entered the bright red of sun and blood. What was appropriate? Anahit had begun with Sofia, so perhaps an adjacent topic from the seventh? Her steward, I recalled, was once an exile himself. I took a last hazy breath.

“O beloved soldier, in world without His sheep

Where is your king tonight? Where is it that he weeps? ...”

~~~~~

Someone waited for me, again. Kuryo Redname drifted before Umihotaru, and was so different from the portraits in her file that I scarcely recognized her. But who else could it be? She was the only one of our kind to live here, as far as the personnel rosters were concerned... but even then, only her size betrayed her heritage. She was also older than I had expected, she had been listed as twenty. But she looked to be a decade or so older than myself - liver spots peppering her face and arms, and her all-but-matted hair a foot long. It was impossible that she was twenty.

These thoughts lasted only a few seconds before being drowned out by the smell.



Savannah's air remained nauseating. This was different.

It was not that now-familiar organic mildew, strange for the fact that it clearly stemmed from life, but death. Real death, an old rot - from the sparrow skull bobbing around on her necklace? The silver clasp that fastened it there glinted in the light, hooking through the eye sockets.

She stank of death. A real and old rot. A sparrow skull hung by a silver claw to her necklace. I had expected her to be strange, and she was more than that.

"Miss Redname?"

She spun in the air, startled by the sound of my voice. Her face lit up when she found me, and wasted no time in kicking her way back to the wall I was perched on.

"Yes! And you're the lieutenant!"

"We had scheduled this meeting for your office, no? Shall we make our way there together?"

"Oh no, let's just have it here and save ourselves the time. I wanted to see your ship, it's beautiful! It's a newer one, right? I've never seen a design like that."

"I don't believe that will be possible." I couldn't in good



conscience let any of the staff stumble on just how elaborate the scrys had become. It was not the right time.

“You don’t have a spare room in there somewhere?”

“I’m afraid not. You’ll find it’s only personal quarters and workrooms, unless you’d be comfortable in cold storage.”

I gave her a strained smile. “But you’ve a good eye. We’re quite proud of him. A commissioned ship, not two years from the Saniasa homewrights.”

“Wow,” she said, turning back to admire the light on its gold and ceramic. “Beautiful. Well, sometime then.”

She continued to stare. “Would you wait here a moment? I’ll consult. We may have some cranny available.”



I whipped my hood off. “Do you know why she is here? Anahit, I could not tell you what is happening. These past few hours...”

“She’s still here? I saw her on the monitors but didn’t dare respond! I thought she’d left... Does she mean to stake us out?” she said, jolting from the geometry of the still-manifested scry. Her forearms were dyed blue, so long had they



been drenched in its waters.

"She's waiting outside, and is worryingly enthusiastic about a tour of the ship." Anahit laughed high and bitter at that. "No issue with using only the airlock?"

She quieted and her face turned stony. "Emelry. You know that's unacceptable. It's our second day, and all... this." She gestured erratically at the mess of wires, diodes, dyes, beads, snaking in and out of the scry. Its cylinder of water had even grown, now mere feet away from the closest shelves. "No one can see this, and her least of all. She could operate it, and half the theologic equipment we have! No."

"Judging by her manner, she'd grow suspicious should we turn her away outright. And I doubt she's had training for any of it. Remember where she is from."

"I remember. Do you? You will not be speaking with another mere colorful foreigner."

"I understand."

"She is an apostate. She is outside. Abstellarism is not a dead tradition."



"I understand." I let a touch of weakness into my voice.

"Anahit, I don't want to have to argue with her. Please?"

She studied my face in that piercing way she sometimes had. "If you use the airlock, Bettany will pass by the both of you upon her return."

"Only half an hour."

"... Oh, fine. But you must clean it out yourself." She smiled. "Go on then, back to work. Make her take us seriously - and be careful."

On the way out, I dipped into my medicine box and downed nearly a handful of antiolfactants, and rewrapped my hood tight. I noticed the fabric had a spot of blue on it. A stray drop of dye must have found me, and bled in.



"I'm sorry I will not be able to welcome you properly, miss Redname. Are you comfortable here?"

"Oh, more than!" She broke away from where she had been examining the filigree around the windows, and drifted across the room to me. I didn't smell a thing. "But if you're ready, I am."





"Very well. Now, if you would, simply affix this to your forehead, at the ajna..."

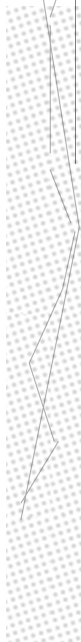
She accepted it and complied after turning it over in her hands squinting from all directions. "So silly. Where are we starting?"

"Why, I believe we can begin with lighter fare. I couldn't help but notice a few reports you authored, attached to your file. Your Triactic is quite fluent. Which languages do you speak, miss Redname?"

"La, but a few," she answered, switching languages entirely. "Are you surprised? It's become a hobby of mine. Do you want to switch to Ilian?"

"I'm comfortable in either, though... not quite so in Novarian. Whatever you'd find easiest."

"Anything you say," she responded, returning to the Akkadu she first spoke to me in. She had an easy and lyrical dialect, perfectly understandable but also unlike anything I'd heard. Whatever it was, it was also unlike last night's feverish rasping. "But you really don't have to accommodate me like that."





“Very well,” I said. “Then, I will try again, with the most pressing question. How did you find employment here, of all places??”

“I mean, that’s kinda my whole deal, right? It was a pretty big event when I first got here, I’m sure you’ve read the stories on it. After all the stuff went down with my hometown I ended up here, had the right skills for the job. I’m a quick learner, and used to keeping up the back and forths. How did you get this job?”

“I’m sorry?”

“What’s your story? You’re a total rookie, I wasn’t able to find much on you.”

“Oh? I’m glad you prepared for the arrival. What did you manage to read?”

She laughed high and warm. “I mean, all I could! Wouldn’t you? The academies have definitely gotten better on transparency. But seriously, tell me a little bit about how you ended up on this fancy boat of yours.”

“As anyone does. My mother and grandfather were both liaisons, so it was an easy route to my own role. It’s a good



life. I like to think treading the same path lets me know both of them better, a sort of loose heritage. School led me naturally to the academy, and I was honored with a challenging first assignment. Does that satisfy you?"

"Juicy." She stared at me smiling, her eyes a purple just a shade darker than mine. "Good answer."

"Yes, I hope that cuts to the heart of it. I mean to do the same. Let's please not spend too much time with me - I'll clarify my question. Why did you end up here, rather than Ilion, or any other Triactan habitat? A strange woman in a strange place," I said, narrowing my eye, "and from an even stranger one."

The warmth fell out of her smile. "Well, like I said, I'm sure you've seen the news clippings. I don't think I'd have much to say besides what they would."

"On the contrary, miss Redname. Your view of the matter is precisely why I've selected you as an interview candidate. You must understand that an abstellar background appears suspicious when on audit, no? I'd like you to dispel of my concerns, if you'd mind."

Her eyes turned cold. "I just told you I don't have much to



say. They blew up my hometown with a giant laser, and the folks here still wanted to take me in.”

“Yes, but it was your life before the colony’s glorification that I —”

“Oh come on, you’re calling it that too? I was hoping you’d at least be honest about it.”

“What? You’ll have to excuse me for following the facts. Director of sales is rather above your station, and by the nature of your position, of course there will be questions. You’ve very few references to follow.”

“What references do you want me to have? Given the whole giant laser situation. I’ve told you.” She picked at the lie detector on her forehead. “I interview pretty well. I have a good skillset, I’m proud of it, and I have to take employment where I can. That’s what you’re leading to.”

“Skillset.” I let my eyes drift across her frame. Still the mess of tangled necklaces, skull included, still the shawl she clutched around her shoulders — a familiar print, in fact. It was the same tessellated bird pattern that I had dreamt of.



"Pretty good work on it, right?" she asked, noticing I was staring. She stretched out the cloth, "Handmade. One of the first things I made during reintegration. What, did you think it was stolen?"

I sighed. I'd make no progress here. "Please, that couldn't be further from my mind. I only couldn't help noticing the ultraviolet dye — seems I've been seeing a lot of it here."

She beamed, stretching out from where she was perched. "Good eye, good eye. Some lunic thing, a virile energy attached to it, ask them about it. It's one of my favorites."

"Hm."

"Oh, and this. Here," she gestured to her loose, clashing hood, a much simpler yabane piece in gold and white.

"This one was stolen, though. Martinsburg, we lived there a year and a half. I was a kid then, the host mom I got assigned made that and I kept it when we left. She also volunteered as my reintegrator."

"It must be dear to you."

"It was. Is. So I'd really like if you stopped trying to pin the crazy pirate thing on me."



"And I'd prefer if you'd stop playing games with me, miss Redname. Do, do you think I will fall for the scatterbrained teenager act? The changelings may not be able to tell, but I assure you I can. You are twice the age claimed in your files, now I don't know if it is a survival strategy, but it will not work among your own kind."

"Ok, so it's obvious." She matched my own frustration, shifting into a harsh voice that I'd not heard from her. "But I know you still won't listen. First you start throwing 'abstellar' around like we're a cult, now you're coming up with some piracy narrative?"

"Narrative? I should think -"

"Well you're not thinking. If it was theft, why did none of the habitats we sheltered with report us? We were a legitimate settlement, legitimate traders, of legitimate old-Ilian stock, and we should have ended up in a museum. I don't care. What happened was the same political maneuvering it always is, and you either know it or are it."

"Political?" I asked, incredulous. "Your 'legitimate settlement' was established by fanatic abstellars, and found the violence that they ultimately sought."



"Let's not talk about my home like that, okay? Like, I get your position. But not to my face, at least." She brushed her loose tresses of hair back, only for them to drift right back.

I scoffed. "You're still calling it a home. You do realize why the glorification happened? This is not a matter of differences of opinion, or even of dogma. You have only ever lived in a sword."

"You sound so, so, so deranged. Is it not the classic Delphic playbook to snuff out anything that challenges its monopoly?" One-many...? I'd never heard the word before,

was it a colloquialism for the world outside her old vessel?

"The drive gave us ten times what a sun link could have, it let us thrive rather than just live."

"Ah, the idol that exceeded a full billionth of the sun's power."

"We were generations away from the cult stuff, alright? There'd be proof of that, if any of it was allowed to survive. There is nothing wrong or unnatural about what we had. A minor, old-model fission unit?

"I assumed the position you've reached would have re-



quired an understanding of at least the heart of it, on your part. You clung to a failed star, and it pulled you far astray, with daily risk of eternal tragedy. Any society would crumble without sunlight, and any society would be poisoned by that thing.”

She answered too-quickly. “I’m grateful to the changelings, and all the neotenes that helped me adjust. I’m where I’m most comfortable.”

“Hm.”

She looked at me. “And the farthest I can be from people like you.”

“From the ecumene?”

She stifled a laugh. “What the hell does the world order have to do with me? I’ve only been talking about Delphi and its sycophants. We weren’t allowed that billionth, you know, what could we do? ‘Irreconcilable differences’, decades removed, and suddenly the right to light doesn’t apply to us? Petty bureaucrat blood feud, and here you are upholding it. You call me childish, but who’s the one clinging to the skirts of a mommy who doesn’t love them? I know who you are. Don’t think I don’t know my history,





empire is always empire.”

I could only stare. She had devolved to pure, bizarre raving. “Empire? Just what do you think the Ecumene is?”

“Can we just call it here? Why do you think I’m here? We’re talking in circles.”

“Yes, since your stance is nonsense. Take that off.”

“What?”

“Take that off, I said. This interview is over. “ She complied, but I saw worry cloud her face.

“You heard enough?”

“I can no longer adhere to the duties of my role. This is your home’s crime, difficult to internalize though it may be: reinvention of the wheel. Kuryo Redname, listen to me, I speak now not as a lieutenant but as a priest of the Ecumene, and as a fellow neotene. Do you think energy is a commodity, to be bartered for and hoarded? Do you think the cold of night to be one of poverty? The dark leads down, ever lesser and lesser, for the nature of Hell is entropy. Sunlight is not a privilege. It is not a physical thing it is the legacy of humanity, all the lessons it has learned,



and all the age it has attained. Here you are, vagabond, on the brink of war! Your parents' parents cut themselves away from the Ecumene because they, like you, thought it old and decrepit, rigid and stifling, no? What have you found out there that is so meaningful? The freedom to drift, the thrill of starvation? The beauty of dust and dark, and the same stars we see? Yet always, always shackled to the Hell of the void. You are unanchored, faithless, and you have returned for a reason."

She glared at me, off balance. "You're so hopeless. What book are you reading from?"

"This is not about supplies, or ways of life. The Ecumene is wide enough for all. This is about literature, and the human project. Your only crime is that you have not heard the story-song of man, and it pains me to know this. Kuryo

"I clasped her hand in mine. "I am sorry to have judged you so quickly. I had great suspicions of you, but you confirmed others. I mean it now, that any welcome you have found upon Savannah you may have doubled in the ships of Ilion. I have little left to ask you. Our scribe will request paperwork of shipping records and contract history, on business, and I will see to it that our speaker counsel you personally in the word, should you ever desire. But for



now, I have no questions left. The interview is over. We can progress no further.”

She blinked at me. I hoped she knew that I had meant it. “That’s it?”

I smiled. “Yes. ”

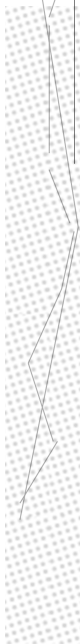


Kuryo left without goodbye. There was little to say. Once I ushered her out, we were done with each other, and she stole away from the docks the way she had come. I returned indoors, to find a quiet place for myself. The women’s quarters gave a beautiful view of the stars turning, and I needed it in the few minutes remaining.

“Emelry, is that you? Has she gone?” Anahit called from the library. Perhaps I hoped too much. “Bring us a towel, would you?”

The tangle of accessories covered yet more of the cylinder, like steadily-growing vines. I darted off to the dining area and passed the towel to her across the room. “Here you are, catch. Still more views to collect?”

“Thank you.” She dried her arms briskly, deeply pruned





from so much time in the water. “Ow. Yes, yes, we’re perhaps halfway. But well enough for the debrief.”

“Distract us a little, Sainshand,” Kaitei spoke up, sliding out from behind the water. I hadn’t known he was in the room. “We’re just passing time before the others return. Anything to share?”

I wasn’t of a mood to entertain. “That water is too close to the paper books. I hope you have it under control.”

“Oh don’t fret, clean-up is simple.” She briskly dried her hands. “But tell us! What manner of man was this Beckon Bell? And, God, the creature too.”

“They were both quite interesting, though I’d mark them both unlikely to be involved in the irregularities. Each of them took pains to be forthcoming, in their own way.”

“Any pings?” Anahit asked hopefully.

“Truthful the whole way. I apologize if you were expecting otherwise.”

Anahit snorted. “Heh. Fooled so easily, by a man with that name? We really should upgrade these things, they’re likely two generations out of date..”



I folded my arms and snapped at her. “Gold is an earnest gender, Anahit. He has kept up the presentation for decades, far as we are from Lune, and it’s safe to assume it’s legitimate. I trust him. And I don’t know where to begin with Kuryo, I... I was hoping...”

The doors rumbled opened again; Bettany and Henarl finally returned. They stole away to the back offices, and quietly, we ceased the chatter and prepared the library for the meeting. Didion distributed lunch to the crew, but I had no appetite. By the time I could sit still long enough to eat, I knew it would be cold already.



The air systems hummed. It was cold. Their dock technicians linked our ventilation with Savannah’s over the morn, and if it was not for the twinge of soil in the air it would have felt as if we were on the voyage again. I looked up, and they all were looking at me.

The scry hung in the center of the room still, rippling in the breeze.

Bettany squeezed all her coffee down in one drink. She broke the silence, framed in her central seat before the li-





brary windows. “Didion, start our minutes. Welcome back, all, good afternoon... First crew hearing of Savannah: arguments for the declaration of a hostile audit. We’ll keep it short. Speaker, lieutenant, walk us through it. What are we dealing with?”

Anahit cleared her throat, and twitched her shoulders—she was nervous. “Upon our arrival, I conducted initial reads of Savannah’s leysphere. They were worrying. All readings thus far suggest over one million souls living among the landscape of Savannah, contrary to all materials we have been provided by the staff, and greatly resembling the decayed soul signatures recorded at Weylbloom. Before further study could be made, and not—not even thirty hours into our landing! The quarters provided to our lieutenant were...”

“Contacted,” I finished. “A drone appeared outside the windows. It was dark, I saw nothing, but it played a recording addressed to me. Specifically me; it knew to address me as lieutenant, but the recording... was in broken Akkadu. A clumsy text-to-speech device with a loose grasp on even basic language. Anahit’s hypothesis may seem far-fetched, but it was baffling.”

“Recordings of the message and Lyly’s first reads should



be in the dossier by now, everyone feel free to look over them both,” Bettany said. “Is there any possibility of this drone simply originating from the staff? What is the theory here?”

“It is a matter of souls, prefect,” Anahit said. “Kaitei? Shall we begin?”

He fiddled with the mountains of equipment. Before us, the water of the scry began to shake - a dull vibration passed across its surface. “I have spent the day in captures,” Anahit said. “We’ve refined our queries, and have a more complete dataset. Moving forward, I submit that... the changelings are meddlers. It is their nature and project, no matter what may be said in contract. Have they bred out a new species of dark-hearted men? Have they dragged a horde of unlucky dead from the neighbor-planes? It is terrible. Whatever it is, it is terrible. I can only hope I am proven wrong, but if you ask me what is happening, this is all I can say. Engineer, could we shift to second pattern?”

Kaitei nodded, and drifted to the other end of the scry’s cylinder. He fiddled with a string of prayer beads clinging to the water’s surface, and soon the surface rippled stronger, in strange alternating waves - it spiked inwards, reforming the surface into a relief of Savannah’s hills and



valleys. Nestled in the deepest of these indents, the water began to boil.

"We've managed to define a few major clusters," Kaitei said.

"If we are looking for souls, population centers, towns and such, are our best option. You can see how clearly they manifest."

"They could even be graveyards - the ley is very light, much sparser than in any standard-sized habitat, and results are vague.." Anahit said distastefully, shielding her chest with her arms. "But we have pinpointed several lines. Three interwoven ones, running along the spine, largely related to spirits of the rotation and weather. But, on the landscape proper, most ley is concentrated along this of the three rivers." She ran her finger along a meander running from the cap to a large lake far into the center of the landscape. "As you can see, every 'village' cluster articulated here falls along the single river. This is all we can tell."

Bettany nodded. "I had been hoping for feed footage. It's a bit hard to swallow that these little clusters could hold millions."





"We're still filling this out, prefect," Anahit said. "But the numbers don't lie. Something is producing these readings, and I do not know anything but a soul that could."

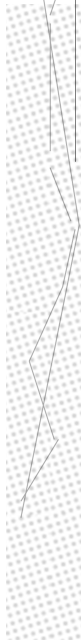
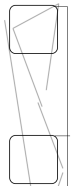
"We are very distant, the air warps any capture," Kaitei said, clearing his throat. "We ran into several false positives for settlement: beaver dams, wicker-bird nests, old scrap that seems leftover from construction accidents. We've given up on visuals until we can be closer and more accurate... the sheer volume of air makes observation even as far as the first lake impossible."

"They cannot be invisible," I said. "I'd like to send out a communications drone directly from the landscape. A physical visit will give us a set of real eyes on the ground."

Bettany frowned. "How can we find a way to do so while avoiding staff attention? I don't like the idea of any of us down there."

"Lyly..." Henarl broke in, "I've always known you as sensible. This is an unbelievable story, but I'd like to be serious about it. It is dangerous here.. I'd prefer a level of contingency, and eyes on this besides ours."

"Yes," Bettany said, "we should begin considering a dioc-





sal report. I think there's enough here."

"Prefect, I mean to contact the See."

Anahit leaned over and gingerly touched his arm. "Henarl, please. Let's not say such things."

He brushed her off, "Why not? Lyly, you yourself have cited Weylbloom, and this... situation's resemblance to so much that happened there. It was Weylbloom that established 'human import' if an audit uncovers matters directly pertaining to the state of the species, it becomes Delphic jurisdiction. As liaison, I say it's necessary, should all this be correct."

"We cannot call on high while still knowing so little, Henarl. We don't know what's right," I said. "You're rash in even calling it dangerous. These happenings only make completing our work the more necessary, not that we abandon it entirely and leave it all to the hammer."

"Not dangerous?" he shot back. "Sainshand, you could have been killed mere hours ago."

"Killed? I hardly take it as that sort of threat. Only the potential fall could have hurt me; the voices spoke nothing of



threats, and the glass was not even scratched.”

“And I’d call few things more threatening than that,” he said. “You were inconsolable. We know nothing of these maybe-men. Perhaps they know nothing of us, and nothing of our protections. If they are watching us enough to know even our roles, should we not show our hand?”

“Enough,” Bettany said with a wave of her hand. “You know that is rash, Henarl.” He balked immediately. The two rarely disagreed. “We know nothing of what exists, or does not. We will talk of broader action once we understand what is happening and nothing before the public hearing, at least. With incontrovertible evidence, we will send a report to the corps offices, and proceed from there. But this is too early. Everyone - we will need more, so let’s get it.”

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Bettany was waiting for me in the airlock. She still wore her formalwear but for her scarf, having never redressed upon returning. Her clothing was rumpled, and her eyes tired. She moved slowly and heavily, but her voice was sharp.



“Emelry. Let’s talk, you and I.”

“I’m in a rush,” I said. My heart fell, she looked skeptical, and I was far too drawn to stand up to her just yet.

“Dr. Savelyevna is departing for the landscape, and I mean to catch her before she is gone. I suspect she misled me, when we first met, and I need answers.”

“Ah, yes. Did you filter for eugeneticists, while first assessing the staff rosters?”

I winced. “...No, no I hadn’t. That does make easy sense, after what we’ve now learned. I should have.”

“No matter. How could you know? But the doctor did come up. She never made a career of it, but it could be good to know before your... big confrontation!” She mock-grinned, dressing the phrase up. “Or, you know, the actual interview.”

“Did she.” This was not out of the ordinary, but her resume made no mention of it. “Thank you.”

“And Emelry,” she continued, “be honest with me. How have your talks gone? The other two from today.”

I couldn’t remember the last time we’d talked at such



length. "I... am satisfied. These are only the preliminary rounds. They were enlightening, but not yet in matters of our case. You will be interested in miss Redname, she -"

"I meant, have you handled them well. I can see you've been shaken. You can take a few days rest, you know. None of us would begrudge it. You do know that?" She could not let a conversation without patronizing.

"We would ill afford that. I'm more than ready."

"Maybe. It could be the opposite," she said. Everyone loved staring at me, today.. "Continue the paperwork side of your role, take a break for a new round of research. We could say you are ill, make them worry a little at what it means. You are all pushing for faster, faster, but we could use some time to think. No?"

"No. Don't make me so fragile, prefect. You know I do not do well with lying."

She smiled, the first one I had seen from the crew the whole day. "Lying! I'd never suggest it. But I won't stop you from overwork... but I will say this. If you are truly committed: soften yourself. Ingratiate. Play the frail lost child, and stop your tongue from sharpening further than



it is.”

“I told you, that does not sit well with me.”

She kicked over to the wall I rested on, and looked at me from beside me. “Listen. But when they look at us, they will see one of two things: a cloistered pencil-pusher, or a little monster with quick hands and strange eyes. We don’t have a welcome to outstay, Emelry. We’ll make the time count?”

I sighed, and collected myself.

“I would love to rest. In honesty, the Redname interview was harrowing. She is much further gone than I had imagined. The things she said to me... I am still struggling to even understand them. She was quite angry, but... never hostile.” I met her eyes, clear and straight. “And I was expecting interviews to be hard on me. It is part of the training, and I’m here for a reason. If Henarl is right about the worst case, it is all the more reason not to sit and idle - you know that. We can’t afford my absence just yet, and I don’t think we have the luxury of playing mind games. I understand what you’re saying, and I’ll do what I can, but please do not ask your theatrics of me.”



Her strangely light eyes held mine. "I can live with that," she said flatly.

I fidgeted, adjusting my hood. "The train will be preparing to depart..."

"Why, look who's aiming for the vitals," she joked, leaving her perch and drifting back to the opposite wall, tossing her hair and moving to the next line of questioning. "Emelry, if you were to hypothetically visit the landscape, would it not be reasonable to make the visit on a litter?"

"Of course." My stomach twisted. "You couldn't dream of sending any of us without one."

She smiled. "Excellent. Anyone could see how reasonable it is, precisely. Yuu has checked out a small fleet of observation drones from the reserve that would fit flawlessly in one."

"But you wouldn't mean to send me."

"I think you have the best excuse of all of us. Pester Savelevna to take you."

"What! I couldn't do that. I can see the utility of a visit, but it's you that has conditioned herself for it."



“But I lack the authority. Well, I don’t lack it strictly speaking,” she said as if it had occurred to her for the first time.

“I know I’m in charge, and that Henarl should be the public face, but it will be you that spends the most time with those most significant to all of us. It will matter most, if it’s you.”

“You’ve spent most of your time here in the executive suites, of course. It must be a joy.”

“That’s true,” she said. Why was she having such fun with this conversation? “And, you’ll thank me for it, when you join me there tomorrow. I’m pleased to report that dear Anyndel really is the airhead he seems, and I’ve quite a few details on the leadership that you’ll appreciate... now, will you ask me nicely?”

Unfortunately, I did.



It was half an hour before the train was scheduled to depart, and the station was empty. I traipsed across the suddenly-present floor - Beckon had mentioned this. The station was far enough out from the cap’s center than a just-lighter-than-lunic gravity had established as the lower



zones gave way to distinct stories. With my luck, I wouldn't be surprised to cross his path. I kept moving, keeping in the air as best I could.

My mind was a fever. I rubbed my bruise until it hurt, re-playing what Bettany had told me, trying to make sense of it.. Thank God, thank God for granting me the insight to plan my approach as I had. Unimaginable that at one point during the voyage, I had thought to begin with the highest leadership. In fact, I was also regretting turning down a week's vacation - tomorrow would make today look like one. Already I was dreading this brunch of hers.

It was empty in the waiting area, and largely empty in the train - aside from Razina's head rising from the seatbacks.

I sat across from her.

She spilled her coffee. "Lieutenant!"

"Hello. Only a three-hour ride, is it? You never mentioned you lived on the surface."

"Why are you here? We barely spoke, I didn't... what is this?"

I placed my lie detector on the table between us, with a





short slow bounce. "I'm here to ask some questions now."

She covered her face. "Miss Sainshand... I don't... this is really, really out of order. You know you can't target me like this."

"Targeting? I was simply hoping to catch you while I could, doctor. It seems you'll be away for... how long is it?"

"Scheduling... look, we're pulling out in twenty minutes. Can we please...?"

"They will hold it for me as long as I ask." I crossed my legs. "I realize you're apprehensive of me. I understand. But can you understand how all this evasiveness must read to me? Curiosity and perception are the tools I rely on, and you are making yourself more and more interesting." I did not break eye contact.

She glared at me longer, but slid herself just forward enough to take the detector. "Alright," she said, making a show of applying it properly. "Alright, if you're this set on getting it over with."

"Why did you lie to me about the train?"

She scoffed. "It's not a lie to discourage you."



"The trips don't take a full day."

"They're scheduled for once a day."

I crossed my legs and leaned forward. "That means nothing to me."

"You need to stop lashing out like this. I mean it." She shifted forward in her seat as well, and jabbed her finger at me as she spoke "Neotenes are just not built for what you're trying to do, I don't care how many stretches you've been doing. It's not healthy, it's not a good idea, and if you're that set on being shown around then I can arrange a drone tour or something. I'm saying this for your health."

She was not exactly wrong. Why did it suddenly feel so urgent to be there, when I had been terrified of the idea? I turned my phone over in my hands, even this trace level of gravity twisting it bizarrely. Was this a childish spite? Did something in me want to confront my assailant?

"You've a background in eugenetics. That was not reflected in your resume."

"I'm not putting the least prestigious of my, I assure you, many degrees on a resume. And you should already know





it's pretty standard for anyone in practical biology to study eugenetics; the human genomes are an easy and familiar baseline."

"So you wouldn't call yourself an expert?"

"I'm versed enough to tell it like it is. Look, it's mostly a history degree, plus a little bit of insurance. You've seen the staff, modifications will always be a decent living out here. Is there a reason you're bringing this up?"

"Only your comments on my kind. We'll disagree here. Thank you for your concern, Dr. Savelyevna, but I will be visiting shortly."

"Do whatever you want. Just don't say I didn't warn you when those bruises get worse."

Without pausing, I asked, "I'd like to know why you make your home in the interior. I have had no indication of any inhabitation, until learning of this. Is it not a reserve?"

She laughed joylessly under her breath, and spoke steadily, as if explaining to a child. "Alright. There are three main settlements. They are located at the foot of the caps, left-overs from the construction phases when materials were



being brought in via them. Since then they've each grown to be a small outpost, and are each a mouth of one of the three rivers. They house our water filtration systems, our greenhouses and testbeds. You'll hear them referred to as valleys."

"A water processing center hardly seems to suit your skill-set," I hazarded.

"You sure know a lot," she said, still subdued, and took a deep breath. "But fine, here. I know you'll tear me apart anyway. I've lived here a long time, and I like to live places that remind me of home. Nowadays I've left most of the official duties of my job to my subordinates, and spend most days small-time farming. I call it research. I'm a half-retired consultant, lieutenant, and y'know I hate to admit that? You're in the middle of this huge enduring archive of the project as a whole, and you've caught me at the point where I matter least. Now I've told you everything, and once you read this thing you'll stop the farce. If you call me a liar again, I'm walking out."

I couldn't do anything to stop my face from burning. "I-I see. I suppose I've been forward, doctor. It has been... strange, to be here, and see things. Thank you for your forthrightness."



"That's fine." She at last let herself rest in her seat again.

"I get it. This is your first job?"

"The crew's first. Save for our engineer."

"Hm. I get it. I'm sorry too, I know I've been shying away. I was being suspicious, and here we are."

"I won't trouble you too much further. The first rounds are limited to thirty minutes. I'll only ask one more thing, and that you answer it as best you can. Is that acceptable?"

She shrugged. "Sure."

"How did you come to your current role? Let's have a proper introduction - tell me about why you've ended up here, on the fringes of the world. Why have you chosen Savannah to give your efforts to? Most of your career was spent in the inner system."

"I was traveling so much then. I was working as a minor analyst all across the canopy, mostly in independent hubs that had let their Hightower subscription tiers lapse. It's funny, in the middle of all that, I met Tacimarsa back on Heath."

"Your first contact was Tacimarsa?" My heart stilled.



She blinked. “Yep, we met on Heath. She reached out to the division I was with then in Maudland looking for some wholesale genebanks - hardy grasses, passerines, aquatic microbials, all the weed-stock you’d expect from somewhere getting its roots down. Most of them still have descendants right here. She had a very specific focus, she was very persuasive, and was very eager to share the vision. I think we became friends.”

“Think?”

“Well, keep in mind, I did meet her as Taci,” she said, gesturing as if to spell it out. “And it was what, two or three years and she was already Tacimar? It’s all a bit intricate...” Here she was not annoyed, but rather off her balance in a way I hadn’t yet seen. “Actually, look, I probably shouldn’t be talking about that without her here. You’ll be meeting her tomorrow anyway, right?”

“Ah, yes. Yes I will.”

“Well I won’t be at brunch, obviously. Unless you plan on ordering me there.”

“Let’s continue,” I shook my head. “What did she say to convince you?”



“Well, hasn’t the place fascinated you?” She smiled. “I didn’t need much convincing, and neither did the Ilian archdiocese, I’m sure. When she first pitched it to me, I wanted to be a part of it as early as I was able.

“I did grow up on Heath. My family was never really the ‘ancestral homeland’ type, so we lived in the outskirts of Nairobi like everyone else. They worked up in Kozue, and when I got older I started studying and working up there too. I was elevator commuting every day for a while, actually...” She smiled to herself, but looked down and continued. “Anyway, as soon as I was out of school I was working, back and forth across the whole canopy. This habitat wanting so and so cultivar, that island wanting such and such invasive species check, the standard.”

“My. Savannah has seemed lonely, even by my own perspective. I cannot imagine how desolate it would seem to one raised in the largest city in the world.”

“I’ve never felt that way. There’s only so much work for those of my profession back home, it’s all the same old husbandry stuff that’s run itself for a long time. Necessary and impressive, but Savannah is so challenging. So new. We have to make our own frontiers, now.”



The train rumbled, some engine or other clattering to life down the line. Razina met my eyes. "If you're gonna make them hold the train, I'd do it now. Unless you want to go on your big adventure without preparing."

"No... no, of course not. I'm happy to leave it there."

"Good. Now, since you really are set on it - at least let me show you around when you get there. We'll set something up through Anyndel." She handed me my detector again. "And we'll talk soon. Maybe without this."

I clutched it tight behind my back, and gave a warm nod. "Maybe."



My mother had told tales of lieutenants' intuition; I had always supposed it from her secondhand to be a vague sort of radar one cultivated with experience. A sixth sense, peripheral. But now, I was to be going to the surface, at God knows what hour. What bramble would I tear through? Was I seeing, or being shown?

I could not afford it so early.

Didion and I sat in a bubble tent just outside the ship, in





the open docks. It was warm from the heaters sewn into the military-sleek camping material, I had taken my hood off. Between the caffeine and a new urgency I was burning, and felt I couldn't possibly sleep should I even succumb to wanting it. No, the morning was close, and I was ready to face it.

I hated to accept the prospect of the true descent of a visit. It still shook me. With the help of the schematic database that was among the resources Beckon Bell graciously granted our crew blanket access to, I had enlisted our scribe into charting a three-dimensional map of Savannah's ventilation system - any routes from the cap to the sky, that one could sneak something autonomous up or down. We "kept watch" against nothing, to make myself feel better, but I needed to see it coming - if something else were to visit.

I looked out on the vast fluorescent-lit corridors, their palm fronds and little orchids in hydroponic pots. Out of curiosity, I consulted the maps. A breeze blew, from the yawning corridors at the left turn even further down the hall... and I looked back to the map again. I checked, and double checked.

From what I read... the schematics suggested that at no



possible point should wind ever blow from that direction. The layout, the corner we had moored in, simply could not account for it.

Didion nodded when I confided this to him. At his suggestion, we packed our little camping project up again, suddenly cold in the night, and retreated to the safety of Umihotaru's bulks. Surely, nothing in the world could dare accost a lawship.

I resumed my vigil in the kitchen, and stole a cup or two of Bettany's coffee. Ill winds, on the eve of the great mission! The further I thought, the less worried of the landscape I became after all.

Brunch with the senior leadership - she was mad to allow me anywhere near there, with what we already knew. How could I maintain composure like that, while flaunting about our little psychic trinkets? Facing the morning without sleeping seemed quite a good idea. So I thought a little more, ate a day and a half's worth of food from our stores, and began to read in a library that was, mercifully, damp in only a few places.

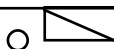




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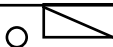
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NEW ANIMALS -Grotesque aesthetics have become a focus on wired textual art scenes. Heavy visceral imagery is something familiar across the internet and its attention economy which has spread to art forms from text to even games such as Cruelty Squad. In the abstraction of the wired, how do artists begin to affect others. The tundra of NEW ANIMALS seems just like that with its wandering mercenaries, relentless industries on a dying world and the gore of violence and mutation. This landscape is familiar in that it mirrors the effects of climate crises but NEW ANIMALS gives this world a polyphony that dances across the lichen.

Like the artist's previous work, COSMUSEUM, NEW ANIMALS retains the same virtuosity and scale but with greater focus. The first prologue brings so much world with details of the various companies and climate disasters that brought Hudson and Amelia together before their encounter with the Bears. This world is not just the companies or the mercenaries on the decessitated earth but the astral that looms over the conflict before introducing the creatures that brought the violence pause. There is much character exploration alongside the world that still keeps pace despite not delving into the character's interiors. That depth goes to the second prologue: Graduation



whose change from *The Bears* is reminiscent of denpa-kei aesthetics: endless everyday, sudden violence. Essein's departure from high school is familiar but the specificity and raw experience conjures this so much it almost puts the initial prologue into memory. It will not be long until the prologues intersect.

SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY- Apart from works such as *Subahibi* or *Amygdalatropolis* or *No Tiger*, it's rare for text to capture the present moment. The 2010s-20s were a year of great stratification in culture and politics and much of the response has seen little action, contributing mostly to cultural strife through articles and youtube commentary. *Swords Under the Phosphor Sky* not only captures the essence of the present but renders it in such a lush way that one can experience the world of the 2010s: a world radiant in media and hyperviolence.

Yelena's landscape is an interior familiar to many who have grown up with the internet. the bodily description inhabits the spaces she's in whether it's from her mother's native wisdoms to girlhood at the summer camp with Christine, her experience is specific with disaffect and unfulfilled desire. 2010s is known for the solidification of the affect economy, one that is based in cultural imagery in order



to maximize engagement and attention. Yelena's world is rendered to show that landscape and the alienated bodies from the mediated, the other bodies unlike hers. Unlike American Psycho, this world is already familiar with the gruesome violence and its abstract yet stylized geometries. No matter what happens, one cannot look away.

MERCENARY PLANET - Despite much of the turmoil within the 2010s, there is little said about the great intimacy that was indeed present. Mercenary Planet is a work that embraces everything both from the music that Mai creates to Leona's anomie upon homecoming, the starlight that guides all of them. Each are out to not only find the possibility but the necessity to find a new world.

Despite an encounter with a cosmic being, this work is very grounded with its depiction of precariousness. Leona's interior is well realized as they encounter many cultural phenomenon tied with their own dysphoria affecting their daily life back in the city amidst the perilous conditions them and their friends face. If there is one thing about the 2010s that this work understands, it's the precarious generation whose daily life is rocked by instability be it physical, sexual or otherwise. even leona's brother who is not exposed to the same life deals drugs and makes

NOTES



their own lab. all of this is a source of tension between them and their parents, the generation before theirs with stable income yet unable to maintain their semblance of family. this kind of disintegration is ultimately what pushes Leona in their studies, in their hopes to connect better with Mai and ultimately, to understand others unlike themselves. That not only they have the capacity to know the same feelings but also begin to communicate to those beings.

SCARRED ZERUEL - Cyberpunk is commonly defined in exterior styles that proclaim the future in the asymmetrical but rarely has it become an interior landscape. While none of the present time may look like cyberpunk, much of the psychological phenomenon is very much a reality. Cyberpunk is an ethereal presence and Scarred Zeruel manages to capture a psycho-floral dimension inhabiting virtual space lush with flora and static that carries pheromones and data alike.

SCARRED ZERUEL's minimal yet concise text uses both its medium and the visual. its short sections make use of the white space, as if each sentence floats within it much like the impressions morgan experiences. these impressions are also strong in their description but enough so



as not to be too clear. much like morgan, each flicker of synapse dissolves as quickly as it appears. surprisingly, the naturalistic imagery not only gives body to the abstract nature of the wired but brings a natural dimension to the cyber as much of it is rendered in urban analogue. each part of the text works like particles where one can just make out the genome and data within this space. the compression creates a strong affect that immerses one into the wired through its essence.

PSYCHOGRAMMA - The current consensus on cyberpunk is that 1) we're living it and 2) it's dead, as a genre. It's been for a while - arguably since the dozens of other "-punk"s rose up to replace it - but became particularly apparent with the release of Cyberpunk 2077, a glossy mirrorshades-and-neon self-parody which provoked every commentator on the internet to give their own interpretation of what had gone wrong, whether the genre had lost its anticapitalist edge or was broken and Orientalist to begin with. Contrary to cyberpunk pioneer William Gibson's hopes, realistic fiction hasn't lived up to the promise of our wired present either, leaving us with little representation after the 80s of some of the most "contemporary" aspects of our lives. There have been signs of a resurgence - I would argue that Cruelty Squad is a cyberpunk text,



in the tradition of weird military-cyberpunk games like Killer7 - but few dare hew as close to the surface signifiers of the genre while still claiming - and managing - to do something original as caraparcél's PSYCHOGRAMMA.

PSYCHOGRAMMA routes much of its cyberpunk influence through the transformations that surface has undergone in non-narrative media, through aesthetics like vaporwave and dreampunk, which break from the dialectic of narrative as critical vs. entertaining to distill post-digital urban existence as stimmung, a Romantic attitude to the "second nature" that seems increasingly beyond human control or understanding, yet at the same time subconsciously, magically connected to us. Of all the cyberpunk tropes it places the most emphasis on the aspect of digital as dream-life, as distorted psychological projection, with which we have become increasingly (un)familiar as the surreal and inexplicable inner logics of social media memes, ideologies and relationships that eludes cyberpunk's pretensions to noir realism. That noir realism is still present in PSYCHOGRAMMA, both in self-consciously nostalgic, quasi-parodic form in the persona of Foxtel - one among many digital personas borrowed from media genres (the operator Viper, the otaku Kunikida, the idol Tohka), cohabiting a genre-less post-





modern “metaverse” - and in the more grounded form of the underworld he inhabits, a rhizome-map of secretive networks of power (Triads, mercenaries, conspiracies) that constitute the only possible distribution of violence across a digital dreamworld. But where stylistically, noir tends towards a stripped-down, sharp-edged and clear - if chiaroscuro - prose, PSYCHOGRAMMA spreads out in a borderless landscape of lush imagery, lighting, colour, contour and abstraction. Sentences coil around each other like half-encoded “dream-thoughts” through cyberspace, inner space and reality. Rather than the stimulant speed of Landian meltdown, PSYCHOGRAMMA slows down to process information overload, even in a gunfight choreographed with the graceful mechanism of Hong Kong film, to the time-dilating polyrhythm of DXM or the leaned-out trap that constitutes another stream of contemporary cyberpunk imaginary.

With the same fluidity with which its virtual and physical world slide together, PSYCHOGRAMMA shifts between the hard-and-fast techno-military logistics of the cyberpunk thriller which has traditionally dominated the genre and the more introspective, phenomenological sub-stream exemplified in works like *Serial Experiments Lain* - a synthesis badly needed to address an era in which geopo-



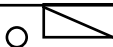
litical conflict is driven by memetic subcultures and vice versa, let alone imagine its future. The structure of Fox-tel's rational, violent, and yet romantic investigations into digital legends, mysteries and alternate realities is both a psychological and objective relation to a world in which mind and body both melt into their mediations.

IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN!-NEET media from Welcome to the NHK to Oyasumi Punpun confront the growing isolation individuals feel and its effects in both physical and psychological ways. Despite this, part of what makes them powerful is their nature that much like life sometimes can be as humourous as it is serious. IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! understands this with a title straight out of a light novel and a character whose interior is very detailed with the psychological landscape of a NEET from mediated understandings of social interaction, social blunder and complex psychosis that debilitates them to a stand-still. Despite the serious psychological conflict faced, its narration is accessible, intrusive thoughts and sudden ideas cut naturally into the pace while retaining levity particularly when Luskonnig makes his brief visitation upon the real world.



The shut-in has become common in online text art circles as online culture and hikikomori go hand in hand but like the NEET media that understands it as part of greater systemic and social problems, IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! also understands that the shut-in and the riajuu (normal people) are very similar. Much fascinating is the relationship between the Dark Lord and Ymanñ's whose powers and life is spent keeping the former's powers at bay in a somewhat ascetic lifestyle. Ymanñ's convictions and detachments mirror Lukonnig's internal terrors and mediated relation to experience. Both the hikikomori and the people who keep society running have particular psychic maladies in withdrawal and hyperactivity which cross between each other as both conjure chaotic states of being.

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY - "Can it be solarpunk if it's set in space" is a question the Friends At The Table's Twilight Mirage has already posed about the budding genre but Amara Reyes' Down By The River To Pray equips us better to answer. DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY fulfills solarpunk's vision of a utopia both rational and re-enchanted, but such that its otherworldly setting is a key part of its answer; it dares to imagine ecology without Gaia. Gaia, or Heath, has of course not been simply aban-



done or expended as resources for expansion, as in the space fantasies of our current ruling class. The redemptive history of Heath - subject of forthcoming projects in the “Heath cycle” - is a precondition for its thriving interplanetary polity - a model first of post-natural stability, so that on Savannah it can model a return of “wildness” as newly troubling freedom.

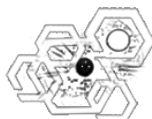
DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY presents its findings in a deceptively down-to-Earth form - the bulk of the report is structured around dialogue, in a mode reminiscent of classic sci-fi such as the Foundation series and Dune. This dialogic emphasis, while bordering at times on the theatrical, reconnects to a deeper heritage of the novel: the “polyphony” Bakhtin identifies in the great realists. Such a polyphony - drawing on not only the voices of the individual characters but the “languages” of different classes and cultures, registers of social discourse, and impersonal tropes observed in the real social world - is particularly difficult to achieve in a speculative novel, which filters the multiplicity of the present through a speculative transformation situated in one author’s imagination and almost inevitably privileging certain elements. But it is indispensable to the function of speculative fiction as Amara Reyes imagines it - in which ecology itself can only be under-



stood as intersubjectivity, and in which the “future” does not derive from a present but represents a moment in a divine river of history complete unto itself.

It is only by the most rigorous polyphony - a polyphony facilitated by graceful protocols of communication, the mannered transparency of its priest-lawyer-narrator - that DOWN BY THE RIVER is able to embrace solarpunk pluralism without resorting to the trope of localism, the liberal counter-utopianism of “small solutions”. Yet it also resists the conflation of solarpunk tendencies with a retrofuturist utopianism or generic ecomodernism by a thorough immersion in the aesthetics on which solarpunk was founded. The re-enchanted life-as-form of art-nouveau, here reflected as much in the form of the prose as the richly implied material settings, becomes an expression of the spiritual principle animating the project of life freed from necessity but not from interdependence.

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